

# **HIGH GROUNDS**



*by* **ALAN M. BUCK**

\* **ILLUSTRATIONS BY** \*

**RICHARD BENNETT**



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# THE HOUND OF CULAIN

BY ALAN MICHAEL BUCK

MY SAINT PATRICK

THE HOUND OF CULAIN

WHEN I WAS A BOY IN IRELAND





# THE HOUND OF CULAN



by ALAN M. BUCK

\* ILLUSTRATIONS BY \*

RICHARD BENNETT

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DEDICATED  
TO  
WILLIAM AND DERMOT O'GRADY



## PREFACE

THIS is the tale of Cuchulain, famed Irish hero.

Cuchulain means, “the Hound of Culain” and is pronounced, *Cu-hull-an*.

Cuchulain has been compared both to the Achilles and Apollo of the Greeks. The truth is he was more virile and certainly more human than either of those two divinities. Indeed, it may very well be said, that Cuchulain is an historical rather than a mythological character. Writing of him in his preface to *The Coming of Cuchulain*, the great Gaelic writer, Standish O’Grady, says,

“Cuchulain and his friends are historical characters, seen as it were through the mists of love and wonder, whom men could not forget, but for centuries continued to celebrate in countless songs and stories. They are not literary phantoms, but actual existences; imaginary and fictitious characters, mere creatures of idle fancy do not live and flourish so in the world’s memory.”

But whether historical or purely mythological Cuchulain was a valiant, chivalrous and truly lovable young man and if I, in the ensuing pages, have been able to present him as such I have accomplished my task.



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“Keep in your souls some images of magnificence so that hereafter the halls of heaven and the divine folk may not seem altogether alien in spirit.”

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PART ONE

THE BOYHOOD DEEDS OF CUCHULAIN





## CHAPTER ONE

### *Dechtire's Wedding Feast*

---

IT is not enough to say Cuchulain was born on such and such a day at such and such a place in Ireland. We must first relate the strange events leading up to his birth if we are to know properly the exciting story of his life. To do this it is necessary that we journey back nearly two thousand years and visit Emain Macha, the seat of the kings of Ulster. A good king sat on the throne in those days. Conchubar was the name on him; Conchubar macNessa. In the days of his reign he did much to further learning and the arts. It is told of him that he was born the day Jesus was born and that he died of grief on hearing of the Crucifixion, albeit

he was ever a pagan. Important to us is the fact that he was destined to become Cuchulain's uncle.

Properly speaking, our story begins with the banquet King Conchubar gave at Emain Macha one time in honor of his sister Dechtire's wedding with the chieftain Sualtim macRoig. This banquet was really a brilliant affair. Royalty, nobility and great landowners attended from all over Ireland. Famous poets, bards and declaimers of the laws of the land furnished the entertainment. The tables were heavy laden with scrumptious things to eat. Slaves hurried to and fro with more and still more delicacies. Cupbearers served mead as if that heady wine were water. Bondmaidens danced attendance on the ladies. In short, it was a feast worthy of the joyous occasion.

Seated at a table surrounded by her fifty handmaidens, Dechtire was truly a beautiful bride. She wore a soft flowing, white silken robe, girdled at the waist with an emerald chain. Her hair was parted in the middle and two black, lustrous braids hung down to her waist. Pricelessly bejewelled with rings were her thin, tapering fingers and adorned with amulets her soft, rounded arms. Taken all in all, her appearance was that of a princess which, of course, she was, being sister to King Conchubar.

Ah Dechtire, little did you dream and you in your sweet sitting midst your beauteous handmaidens, that by sunset you would wear the plumage of a bird!

And in this strange way it came about!

At the height of the feasting and merriment, Dechtire swallowed a mayfly that flew into a goblet of mead she was drinking and she began to cough. A bondmaiden patted her on the back to relieve her. But that seemed to make her cough the more. She coughed and she coughed. Tears started to her eyes. She was almost choking. Thoroughly alarmed, her handmaidens led her away to rest and recuperate in her sunny parlor. There, on a sun-drenched couch with playful sunbeams dancing all about, she presently fell into a deep slumber. How long she slept she had no idea. But when she awoke, it was to find a handsome, princely youth standing beside her couch, gazing lovingly into her startled eyes. Where had he come from? Seemingly out of nowhere. And what was he saying?

"I was the mayfly you drank in your mead, Dechtire. I am Lugh son of Kian."

Lugh son of Kian! The Sun-god! Dechtire was filled with awe. What could the Sun-god want of her, who had been so modestly retiring, and undesiring of attention?

This:—and these were his very words—"I love you, Dechtire and you must come away with me now; you and your fifty handmaidens."

What could Dechtire do? Before she could cry out or gainsay him in any way, he had changed her and her handmaidens into a flock of delicately

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plumed birds and was leading them out the window and off to the home of the fairies in the Mound of Angus on the banks of the river Boyne.

Alas for the wedding feast! The awful truth was soon discovered. Dechtire, the bride, had vanished. Where she had gone or how none could tell. Fastly a funeral air pervaded the banqueting hall. King Conchubar, Sualtim macRoig, the guests, all were filled with dread forebodings. They began to keen their grief. Ulster never echoed so mournful a sound before nor since.



## CHAPTER TWO

### *The Birth of Cuchulain*

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THREE years passed, three weary years, and still Dechtire did not return. Hope that she ever would had long since been dissipated. Her loved ones had even made up their minds to try to forget her. They feared her dead; lost to them forever.

But then one bright day when the sky was flax-blossom blue all over and the sun shone down paling the deep green of the grass with its golden rays, a flock of fifty birds alighted in the fields round the palace and as if by preconceived plan began to claw the ground and uproot the crops. Several attempts were made to drive them away. All failed. They would fly a perch or two away and come back again. At length King Conchubar was appealed to. Would he drive out with some of his warriors and put the birds to flight or kill them; one of the two?

Hastily ordering nine chariots yoked and manned, King Conchubar sallied forth. Nine chariots charging are a thrilling sight. But the birds, seemingly frightened by the noise, took to wing, flying fastly southward. Undaunted and wishful for revenge, King Conchubar lashed up his horses and led his

warriors in pursuit. Across mountains, over plains and splashing through rivers, they went; the hooves of the horses thudding thunder, the over-heated axles screaming as if with pain, the wheels rumbling alarmingly, but always the birds led the way. It is significant that they were heading for the Boyne. By the time that historic river was sighted, however, night was falling fast. In a last desperate effort to come up with their quarry, King Conchubar and his companions urged their horses forward with cries and lashings. But it was no use. Almost before they realized it, they were enveloped in darkness and the birds had dropped from sight. With a sigh of disappointment, King Conchubar cried halt. It would have been futile to go on.

"Unyoke," said he. "And you, Fergus macRogh, you go in search of a lodging for the night. 'Tis too late to think of returning to Emain Macha and the horses are in a lather and tired out."

Now, Fergus macRogh was the chief warrior of Ulster. He had been king before Conchubar and feared was he throughout the land. Let us accompany him, therefore, on his quest.

Stepping out warily for fear of rabbit holes and tree roots, and skirting the dark and ominous line of pinewoods on his left, he soon found himself at the head of a bohereen. Where there's a bohereen there's a house, thought he, turning down it. Sure enough. Presently, he saw in the distance a wee biteen of a house with a light burning in the window.

He quickened his step. The light was such a glad-some sight. A dog barked as he drew near. A moment later, the door to the wee biteen of a house was thrown open and a man's voice called out, "Who's in it at all at all at this hour?"

Fergus stepped forward. With half an eye he could see that he had stumbled across the abode of a poor peasant and his wife. As soon as he made himself known, the man invited him in.

"You'll have a bite to eat maybe?" said he.

But hungry as he was, Fergus protested that he could not eat without his companions. Whereupon, the woman said, "Go get your friends then and although we be poor as can be it is we that will share and gladly what little we have with you."

"Faith," replied Fergus, "'tis the good, kind people you are whoever you are." And with that for his thank you, back with him in his steps.

King Conchubar was well pleased to see him return so soon. "What luck?" cried he.

"I have found a peasant that will take us in."

"Good," said King Conchubar. He was not above spending the night in humble surroundings when the occasion called for it.

Unfortunately, the same cannot be said for his companion, the chieftian Bricriu of the Bitter-Tongue. Said he, "O king, what would we be doing in so humble a place? We would have to be sleeping in our tall standing like as not and without covers and the bit we would get to eat . . ."

"Have done!" thundered King Conchubar. "We named you well when we named you Bitter-Tongue. Let you stay here if you are too high and mighty to come with us."

Before Bricriu could find words to reply, all had departed and he was left alone.

Ah, it was then he regretted his hasty words in earnest! The thick darkness, the awful velvety stillness of the night weighed on him, frightened him. He became full of fears, fears that magnified themselves into colossal demons fearful of aspect, towering satanic shadows that threatened his very existence. Faced with the prospect of losing his mind or pocketing his pride, he choose the latter and almost at a run and with heart beating loudly, went in search of the wee biteen of a house. But really he felt that the search would be quite in vain.

Strange! Very strange! He had gone but a few steps when right in his path, he beheld a magnificent mansion, a veritable palace with a light burning in every window and a handsome, princely youth in his standing by the open door.

"Fergus must have sties on his eyes to have passed by this place," he muttered to himself.

"Come in, let you and welcome," invited the handsome, princely youth.

"Welcome indeed," called out a fair, young woman from the shadows of the hallway.

Wondering at the strength of the welcome put before him—after all he was a total stranger—

Bricriu made bold to ask the handsome princely youth who he was.

His question went unanswered.

"Is there anybody missing from you up Emain Macha way?" inquired the handsome, princely youth.

Bricriu was startled. He hadn't said that he came from Emain Macha? How then was it known?

"Well, is there?" The handsome, princely youth was repeating his question.

"Anybody missing is it?" Bricriu collected his rudely scattered wits, and suddenly remembering, "That there is!" he cried. "Dechtire and her fifty handmaidens are gone from us these three years."

The handsome princely youth smiled. "Would you know them again if you saw them?" he asked.

Bricriu hesitated. "Know them?" he advanced haltingly. "If I would not know them it would be because the years have changed them."

"The years have passed them by." The voice of the handsome princely youth held an authoritative ring.

"What—what's that you do be saying?"

"That was Dechtire herself that greeted you from the hallway just now. Moreover, it was her handmaidens that went as birds to Emain Macha to lure the men of Ulster here."

Bricriu's eyes were balloon-like. "And—and who are you?" he stammered.

"Me?" The handsome princely youth shrugged

his shoulders as if he were of no importance. "I am Lugh, son of Kian."

And it was at that very moment that Dechtire stepped out from the shadows of the hallway and revealed herself. Bricriu recognized her at once. Lugh, son of Kian, had not lied. She was as beautiful as ever. On her arm he saw that she carried a purple cloak adorned with gold fringes, a very beautiful and costly garment. Great was his surprise when she presented it to him with these words, "This is my gift to you, Bricriu, and now you must find King Conchubar and bring him here."

But first Bricriu had to pinch himself to make sure he was awake and not dreaming. Then, "King Conchubar is somewhere hereabouts," he said. "I'll get him for you." And donning his new cloak he started out forthwith.

What passed in Bricriu's mind on that short journey to the wee biteen of a house? What indeed, but this. For reasons best known to himself, he decided not to tell King Conchubar he had found Dechtire and her handmaidens at all. He would but say he had found a house full of beautiful women and let it go at that. Could it be that he wished King Conchubar to have the pleasure of finding out who they were for himself? Perhaps. Still such a generous impulse was hardly in keeping with Bricriu's character. Bitter of tongue indeed was he and a mischief-maker of the first water as we shall see later on.

Coming at length to his destination, he found he had to bend himself nearly double to get through the low door of the wee biteen of a house.

"A botheration on you all!" he exclaimed by way of greeting.

"If that is all you came to say, we can do without it," growled King Conchubar.

"A double botheration on you," blustered Bricriu. "'Twas left to me to find you a house full of beautiful women this night."

A smile slowly replaced the nettled look on King Conchubar's face. "If you have done that same you have done enough for one man," he granted. "Where is it?"

"Follow me and I'll be showing you where."

His invitation was accepted with alacrity by one and all. Having richly rewarded the poor peasant and his wife, they left at once.

Yes, the mansion was still there and the door was open as before. Lugh son of Kian was not by it though, nor was he anywhere to be seen. In a body, they went in. A slave led them to the banqueting hall where a splendid feast awaited them. We may be sure they did it justice. But as time passed and the women failed to put in an appearance, King Conchubar felt himself constrained to ask where was the mistress of the house.

"You cannot see her tonight," he was told. "She is taken to bed with child."

"Oh." King Conchubar nodded his head understandingly. "That being so we may as well retire."

And that is what they did and they slept well and soundly albeit they were in strange beds of which 'tis said, you never get any rest the first night.

In the morning King Conchubar was up early. He planned to leave at once for Emain Macha. Still, it hardly seemed polite to go without thanking his hitherto unseen hostess. But where to find her? The house was morgue-like of stillness; not even the servants were stirring. Suddenly, he heard a baby cry out. The fretful sound came from a room to his right. He paused a moment, undecided. Then he knocked.

"Come in," bade a strangely familiar voice.

He opened the door.

Lo, there on a couch lay Dechtire; a tiny baby to her breast.

King Conchubar was so overcome, he could not speak. In a dazed sort of way, he crossed the room.

"Dechtire!" he managed at last. "Dechtire! is it yourself is in it at all at all?"

Dechtire's eyes welled up with tears of love. "Come sit close beside me, brother mine," she whispered. "I have so much, so many things to tell you."

In a timid worshipful way, King Conchubar seated himself on the edge of the couch.

And in a voice filled with the music of motherhood, Dechtire began to speak. "I am the beloved of the Sun-god. The mayfly I drank in my

mead was he. He spirited me away on my wedding day. Here came we to the Mound of Angus, my handmaidens and I. As birds we came and our flight was swift and unwavering. Here we have lived and here now have I borne my child," and she caressed the babe.

"But why have you sent for me?" gently asked King Conchubar.

Dechtire paled. She knew this question was inevitable. Yet she dreaded it. Still, she must remain firm in her resolve. She must! She must! Leaning over, she laid her baby in the arms of her brother. "You must take him away with you," she sobbed.

"Away with me?" King Conchubar knew not what to say. He was bewildered.

"I want him to grow up among mortals," Dechtire explained vainly trying to stop the flow of her tears. "It is foretold that he will grow great among men, that his name will be spoken in hushed whispers wherever warriors foregather."

Wonderingly, King Conchubar dropped his eyes to the little mite nestling in his arms. A tear stole down his stubbled cheek. Too well now, did he realize why Dechtire had sent for him and the great sacrifice she was making. She belonged irrevocably to the Sun-god. Having dwelt with him in the twilight world, she herself could never return to Emain Macha. Nevertheless, she wanted him, her brother, Conchubar, King of Ulster, to

have her baby. "Dechtire," he promised, and his voice was choked with emotion, "Dechtire, I will cherish him as I do my own boy, Connal. Our sister Finochem will foster him and let the plain of Muirthemne be his inheritance."

Dechtire wept her gratitude.

The anguished parting that followed . . . But no! No! Let that parting be forever sacred to those whom it concerned. We know enough for the purpose of our story. Dechtire's son, as our reader has doubtless guessed, was Cuchulain. We have but this to remember, his name at first was Setanta. How it was changed and why, we shall presently discover.



## CHAPTER THREE

### *Setanta and the Boy-Corps*

---

SEVERAL years have elapsed since the events related in the previous chapter took place. We have neither time nor space, nor is it imperative that we take cognizance of all the changes wrought by those years. King Conchubar, to be sure, is still King of Ulster. Dechtire continues to reside with the Sun-god. For the rest, all the characters we have met are still alive and will crop up again from time to time. Let us therefore confine ourselves for the present to noting minutely the new status of our hero. We have left him an infant. We meet him now, a manly little lad living with his Aunt Finochem on the great plain of his in-

heritance, the forest bound plain of Muirthemne.

So far his upbringing has been entrusted to his nurse, Detchaen. Detchaen has taught him of her knowledge and instilled in him the necessity of being honest and clean of body and mind; too, she has whiled away many an idle hour, telling him stories of the ancient heroes and, unwittingly perhaps, inflamed him with the desire to emulate those fierce warriors.

In appearance, he is a worthy son of the Sun-god. He is handsome, tall for his age and well-muscled. His head of hair, had Samson had it, Delilah would fain have stayed her hand; 'tis of the gold of the stars and the moon over the river and of a texture finer than the silken wrap that snugly swathes the pearl-toothed ear of corn on its cathedral stem. At first glance it would seem that his cheeks are set with jewels. The emerald sparkles there, the ruby, the topaz and the balais. A closer inspection reveals them as differently hued dimples and one cannot help but marvel at their beauty. Nor must we overlook his seven fingered hands and as many toed feet, his blue eyes suffused with seven lights, his brave, fearless carriage—head up, shoulders back, chest out—and his smile which is like nothing so much as an Indian summer day, being warm and friendly, sharp-etched yet soft and melting. To condense, he is a princeling.

Meeting him now, we find that despite his ex-

cellent physical fortune, he is somewhat discontented with his lot. He feels that the time has come for him to be less dependent on Detchaen. He is growing up. He is getting too old for a nurse, he believes. Besides, he has heard tell of the Boy-Corps at Emain Macha and secretly longs to join it.

As the Boy-Corps may be unknown to our reader, we shall say here that it was a band of noble youths, the sons of the warriors and chariot chiefs, that attached themselves to King Conchubar's court. Young though they were, they were famed far and wide for their deeds of daring and great skill at the game of hurling; a game yet our national pastime; one of the few remaining links left to us of our glorious past. To belong to the Boy-Corps, you had to be of noble if not of royal blood and you had to submit to the Corps as a body and place your life under its protection so that if any ill befell you at the hands of an enemy you would not go unavenged.

Wholly unaware of the conditions of membership, as we shall see, Setanta dreamed night and day of nothing else. Two things stood in his way. He was at Muirthemne; the Boy-Corps at Emain Macha. The distance between the two places was considerable. Then there was his Aunt Finochem. Would she give her permission? He could but ask her.

“Tell me about the Boy-Corps, Aunt Finochem,”

he pleaded one day, hoping to lead up gradually to the matter.

But his ruse was not at all successful. His aunt saw at once what was in his mind. "You are not old enough to join the Boy-Corps, Setanta," she replied.

"It is not years but skill and bravery that count with the Boy-Corps," Setanta protested.

"For all that, you cannot go," denied his aunt. "'Tis a faraway place Emain Macha is. 'Tis past Slieve Fuad so it is and what would your Uncle Conchubar say to me for letting you go alone on such a long journey?"

"Is it east or west of Slieve Fuad it is?" Setanta persisted.

"West."

Setanta said not another word. His aunt thought that he had yielded with very good grace. But when she went looking for him later in the day, he was nowhere to be found. She could have bitten her tongue off then for telling him Emain Macha was west of Slieve Fuad.

For an ordinary boy of seven to have attempted the journey from Muirthemne to Emain Macha would have been an act of madness, a *locura* to borrow a term from the Spanish. It was every last step of thirty miles and there were hills to cross and rivers to ford and forests to pass through; dark forests, the tops of whose trees spreading

fanwise formed a roof through which daylight dared not penetrate, and there were wild beasts lurking in the thickets; wolves and the like.

But let us deal solely with Setanta who was not an ordinary boy.

On leaving home of his own volition, he had with him his hurling stick, his silver ball, a miniature dart and spear both of which had been especially cast for him, and his shield that he wore strapped to his back. Passing safely—guided by the gods, no doubt—through the forest bounding the plain, he hit the main road out of the Ford of the Hurdles, through Muirthemne, to Emain Macha. In Gaelic, the Ford of the Hurdles is called, *Ath-a-cliah*, or more recently, *Baile-a-cliah*, the Town of the Hurdles. We mention this in passing because it is the Dublin of today. Once on this road, Setanta began to shorten the way for himself, by belting his ball out before him with his hurling stick. Then he would run after the ball and catch it before it fell. Later on, he varied this by throwing his stick after the ball and his spear after the stick and his dart after the spear and catching the lot before they even bounced. In this original way, he managed to put the miles at his two heels so soon as they met his fourteen toes. In what seemed no time at all, he passed Slieve Fuad on his left and soon afterwards Emain Macha presented itself to his admiring gaze.

Since we shall have occasion to dwell on Emain

Macha at some length later on, we shall eschew it for the moment and stick close to Setanta. See, he has already seen the Boy-Corps hurling on the lawn. Imagine his delight. Why man, it gave him all he could do to keep from joining them! But that would not have been the right thing to do—burst in uninvited. So he stood on the sideline, an eager spectator; inwardly hoping, of course that he would be asked to play.

Ochone! weirasthru! No one paid any attention to you, did they Setanta? And your spirits sank way down to your sandals. And by-and-by a tear or two stole down your dimpled cheek; small blame to you, lad. It was humiliating to have come so far, to have run away from home for the express purpose of joining the Boy-Corps, only to be ignored. But cheer up, let you now. See, there is the ball coming towards you over the line. It is out of play. Hit it a whack. This is your chance.

With admirable slow deliberateness, he drew back his stick and the clout he fetched the ball was the mother of all clouts. Oh yes, it was. High, way up into the air it soared. Had he rested content with this all might have gone well. But sure he didn't! His blood was up. He followed the ball onto the lawn where he had no business. By that time some of the Boy-Corps had raced up. But Setanta was in there before them. Catching the ball on his stick as it came down, he drove it along before him, never letting it rise above his

knee nor fall below his shin. (A difficult and brilliant feat as any hurler will tell you.) Angrily, the Boy-Corps lashed out at him. 'Tis a great wonder he was not cut clean in two halves, so it is. That he escaped at all was due to his superior speed which now brought him directly in front of the north goal. As the Boy-Corps rushed him, he up with his stick and WHAM!—the ball sped between the posts.

His eyes sparkling his triumph, he turned and faced the Boy-Corps. My, but they were furious! Their eyes blazed unadulterated hostility. And the names they called him!—clodhopper, interloper, wiseacre, dolt, interferer, swelled-head, intruder, obnoxious ass, peacock, nincompoop and so on. He had not placed himself under their protection. For all they knew, he might very well be some laborer's son profaning their noble ranks. In the heat of the moment they showed neither mercy nor restraint. Turning on him viciously, they sought to drive him away, to banish him forever and a day.

Forced to protect himself, Setanta tasted for the first time of his own battle-fury. His blood seemed to turn into a molten river. He felt his strength suddenly treble. A terrible desire for vengeance filled him. Skillfully, avoiding the blows of the Boy-Corps, he laid about him in masterly fashion. It is an acknowledged fact that there were four fifties of the Boy-Corps on the lawn

that day. It is equally true that in his wrath Setanta laid low three fifties of them. The other fifty, he chased clear the length of the lawn and dear only knows what the outcome would have been had not Fergus macRogh come hurrying to the scene. At a glance he sized up the almost unbelievable situation.

"Hold on now," he shouted to Setanta. "For a little fellow you are playing a very rough game."

"And why wouldn't I?" boiled Setanta. "I came here a guest and was not given a guest's reception."

"He broke in on our game, so he did," interposed the captain of the Boy-Corps, a red-headed youth of stalwart parts.

"Don't you know you must submit yourself to the Boy-Corps before you may join in their games?" quizzed Fergus macRogh.

"No, I did not know that," Setanta answered truthfully enough.

"Now you do." And turning to the Boy-Corps, Fergus bade them to take Setanta under their protection and proceed with the game.

So soon as Fergus was gone, however, Setanta flatly refused to submit to the Boy-Corps. He was willing to let bygones be bygones, he said, but submit to them; never! He was the king's nephew. It would be unseemly for him to submit himself to anybody.

"The king's nephew!" scoffed the Boy-Corps.

"You come here without attendants, without a chariot, walking like a laborer's son and expect us to believe you the king's nephew? Pah!"

"Nevertheless," Setanta insisted, "I am the king's nephew and the plain of Muirthemne is my inheritance."

The jeering broke out anew. So did the combat. Setanta tore into his detractors. Scattered by the suddenness of the onslaught, the Boy-Corps retreated towards the palace. It was inevitable that Fergus should come running again. This time, he seized hold of Setanta.

"What are you up to now?" he cried, shaking him.

"By my father's father," vowed Setanta, "I swear I will not rest till the Boy-Corps submits and comes under my protection."

"And who are you to make such a preposterous demand?"

"I am Setanta; Setanta, nephew to Conchubar, King of Ulster."

"Setanta! By all the gods this is remarkable! I should have recognized you the first time by your dimples." So saying, Fergus lifted him up in his arms and kissed him.

The Boy-Corps looked on astonished. This really was the king's nephew then? Lord, they had best submit to him or he would be the death of them entirely. Their red-headed captain stepped forward with outstretched hand. "We are sorry

for treating you as we did," he apologized, "and we will submit to you where we would to no one else living."

Sufficiently appeased, Setanta shook him by the hand.

Then as evening was drawing nigh, the Boy-Corps decided to disband, but not without arranging to meet again on the morrow at which time they invited Setanta to join them.

"And won't you come in now to see your uncle?" This from Fergus when none but he and Setanta remained on the lawn.

"I will; indeed I will."

Forthwith, they fell into step side by side and went towards the palace.

Here it is necessary that we interrupt our narrative in order to give our reader some idea of Emain Macha. It may be that we shall be able to describe it as it appeared to Setanta on that first eventful evening.

Emain Macha was something more than a mere palace. It has been called a city and there does not seem to be any reason to doubt that it was one. In the beginning it was the hill where Macha of the Golden-Hair gave birth to twins; hence its name, Emain Macha, "The Twins of Macha." Afterwards it was chosen as the sight of the royal palace and was built, we are given to understand, by our eminent Irish writer, Standish O'Grady, "un-

der the brazen shoutings of Macha and the roar of her sounding thongs."

The Royal House, or palace proper, at Emain Macha covered an area of three square miles and was divided into nine compartments. The walls were of red yew riveted with copper, the floors of oak that once towered high and mighty in the forest and a tiled roof was over all. The great banqueting hall which we have already visited on the occasion of Dechtire's wedding feast, occupied the center of the house. Its massive, bronze doors were never closed, but ever open to King Conchubar's friends. Two Irish miles from end to end was the measure of the banqueting hall. 'Twas heavily raftered and hung with shining ornaments of a truly astonishing variety. At the south end was a raised dias whereon stood King Conchubar's throne neath a canopy of beaten bronze. In the well of the hall were the tables, chairs, couches, benches and footstools used by the guests. Inlaid some of them with gold and silver, while others were set with precious stones, they certainly were magnificent pieces. To the right of the banqueting hall was King Conchubar's private compartment. His walls were of bronze and his ceiling a sheet of sheening silver that reflected all that happened below, but reversed it, so that one saw oneself seemingly standing on one's head in a giant bowl of silver ether. Ornamented bronze pillars supported the ceiling, and hanging down from the

roof-tree of the house was a huge silver gong that King Conchubar would be striking to silence his warriors when, thirsty for war, their uproar became deafening. There too, each on a dais stood the twelve chairs of the chariot chiefs of Ulster. And scattered round and about were fine pelts, ivory chess tables, spear racks, shield pegs and exquisitely carved holders for the rush lights.

But let us take a cursory glance now at the two houses adjoining the Royal House. Not as elegantly appointed as the Royal House either of them, yet doubtless they appealed much more to Setanta. First let us look at the larger of the two: the House of the Red Branch. Here, as in the Royal House, we find an enormous banqueting hall; the feasting ground of the warriors of Ulster, for this is their home. Not one dias here but two. On one sits King Conchubar, on the other Fergus MacRogh; his right to the championship of the warriors undisputed. In several of the adjoining rooms are stored—and what a fine collection they make!—the heads and weapons of the vanquished. All along the walls the weapons range while gory, gouged and awful to behold, the heads hang tied by matted hair from the huge, knotless rafters. It was an awe-inspiring sight!

And the other house? The other house is the Speckled House and here we shall pause but long enough to say that it is here that the warriors of Ulster store their own weapons when not in use—

rare occasion!—and it is because they make such a dazzling array, being of so many different hues and shining metals, resembling somewhat a trout fresh out of water when all together, that the house has earned the name, “Speckled.”

These three, the Royal House, the House of the Red Branch and the Speckled House, were the three most important houses in Emain Macha. All others existed to serve these three and serving existed.

Entering the Royal House, Setanta and Fergus macRogh crossed the great hall to King Conchubar’s compartment.

A slave boy gave them admittance.

Outwardly calm but inwardly a veritable tornado of excitement, Setanta beheld King Conchubar seated on his throne, discoursing with a group of learned men. A feeling of pride swelled up in him. This was his uncle, this great, this greatest of all kings.

King Conchubar looked up as they approached. The movement was registered in the silver ceiling overhead. “Who have you there?” he asked in a hearty voice.

“ ’Tis a young lad I found outside routing the Boy-Corps,” Fergus replied, wishing to let Setanta have the joy of revealing his own identity.

King Conchubar shot him a glance of interest mingled with surprise. It was not everybody that

could put the Boy-Corps to shame. "What is your name, lad?" he inquired.

"Setanta, O King." And as he said so he ran forward and embraced him.

"How in the world did you get here?" laughed King Conchubar, hugging him tight.

"I ran away from home," Setanta confessed.

"And why did you do that?"

"It is the way I wanted to join the Boy-Corps."

"They have already accepted him," put in Fergus MacRogh.

"They have, have they? That was quick work." King Conchubar thoughtfully stroked his beard. He was very much impressed with Setanta's honesty and manly bearing. Perhaps it would be as well to let him stay on at Emain Macha. He was of an age now when he needed the companionship of other young lads. Besides there was his education to consider. "Well," he said at last, "now that you're here you may as well stay."

Wild with joy, Setanta embraced him afresh.

There was great merriment on all in the room after this. Everybody felt a *grah* for Setanta. Moreover, the learned men promised to teach him of their wisdom and Fergus macRogh swore to make him a warrior without peer or die in the attempt.

So unhappily begun, so happily ended Setanta's first day at Emain Macha.



## CHAPTER FOUR

### *The Hound of Culain*

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ONE day soon after Setanta's arrival at Emain Macha, King Conchubar was invited to a feast at the house of Culain the smith. Inasmuch as Culain made the weapons for the warriors of Ulster it would have been tactless of King Conchubar to refuse the invitation.

On his way to the feast then, King Conchubar chanced by the lawn where the Boy-Corps was at play. He noticed that an odd and very unevenly sided game was being played, *viz.* three fifties of the Boy-Corps were sided against Setanta, trying to get the ball past him into the goal and failing miserably. Becoming aware of the king's interest, they sought at once to redeem themselves in his eyes by changing sides. Setanta, they persuaded to go out onto the field while they guarded the goal, that is they tried to guard it, for in one five minutes, Setanta drove the ball between the posts every time he hit it. In sheer desperation then, the Boy-Corps suggested a game of mantle shedding.

Mantle shedding was a game in which the opposing sides sought to deprive one another of their

mantles; the side wearing the greater number at the end being declared the winner.

As before, the sides were the Boy-Corps *versus* Setanta.

At first all was confusion. There were so many of the Boy-Corps and they were so excited that they mistook one another for Setanta. The resultant scrimmage made King Conchubar laugh till his sides ached. But meanwhile Setanta was darting hither and thither, picking the mantles from the shoulders of the Boy-Corps as if he was picking blackberries from a ditch in a sunny glen. By the time the Boy-Corps disentangled themselves, it was to find that the only one on the lawn wearing a mantle was Setanta.

Turning to Fergus macRogh who was with him, King Conchubar remarked, "If Setanta's deeds as a man equal his deeds as a boy, his name will indeed be spoken in hushed whispers wherever warriors foregather."

And Fergus replied, and somewhat seriously, "Fear not, O King; his deeds will grow with him."

"Call him to us now," said King Conchubar, "and we will take him to the feast."

When Setanta came running, his uncle said, "How would you like to go with us to Culain the smith's?"

"Och," mourned Setanta, "I'd love to, but sure I have promised to see out the afternoon with the Boy-Corps. I can't go back on my promise."

"No, you can't do that," King Conchubar agreed, feeling disappointed nevertheless for he was genuinely fond of Setanta's company. He brought back to him his own childhood and in some mysterious way renewed his youth.

Suddenly, Setanta was blessed with an idea. "I can follow after you, can't I?" he suggested.

"But you have no knowledge of the way," interjected Fergus macRogh.

"True for you," Setanta readily admitted. "But what is to prevent my following in your chariot tracks?"

"Not a thing in the world. It is clever of you to have thought of it," lauded King Conchubar.

And so it was arranged. King Conchubar, Fergus macRogh and others of the royal suite went their way and in due course arrived at the house of Culain the smith. A kindly welcome was put before them. Fresh rushes were laid and the feast got under way.

Along about sundown, Culain asked King Conchubar if he were expecting any late comers from Emain Macha.

"No, Culain, my gold-hearted host, I am not. But why do you ask?" replied he, forgetting all about Setanta.

"It is that I have a watchdog that when the chain is taken from him at night that he may guard the place, is savage and possessed of the strength of a hundred."

"Loose him," cried King Conchubar. "Loose him, and may he tear the throat of any prowler venturing near the place this night."

And that is what Culain the smith went and did.

Back at Emain Macha, the Boy-Corps was calling it a day. Setanta remained on the lawn until all had gone. Then he went indoors, washed, disentangled his golden hair and throwing a red and white silken cloak about his shoulders started out for the feast. The chariot tracks were clear and well defined. He had no bother at all following them. As usual, he shortened the way for himself by belting his silver ball out before him and throwing his stick after the ball and his spear after the stick and his dart after the spear and running fleet as a deer and catching the lot before they fell; no mean feat when you come to dwell on it.

Fast as he went though, it was after dark when he neared his destination. Walking up the long hedged-in lane from the road, he could see the lights of the house blazing merrily in the distance and his thoughts were all of the good things he was going to have to eat, for he was very hungry after the long journey. But then he heard a deep and ominous growl from out the darkness up ahead. He stopped dead in his tracks. No doubt at all about it, there was a dog loose, a ferocious sounding dog. He tightened his grip on his hurling stick and stood intently listening. The growl was not

repeated. Perhaps the dog had been called in. Or maybe it had gone off in another direction. Anyway, he could not stand forever in the lane. Gathering up his courage, he proceeded cautiously.

Meanwhile in the house, King Conchubar sat pale and silent. He seemed to be straining his ears towards out of doors.

Culain was first to notice his preoccupation. "What is it, O King?" he asked.

"Was that the hound I heard growl a minute back?" King Conchubar's face was tense as he put the question. The veriest fool could have seen that he wanted no for an answer.

Alas! "'Twas," affirmed Culain. "We'll find the bones of some thief or other outside in the morning."

With a dismal wail King Conchubar leaped to his feet. "Ullagone, ullagone!" he wailed. "'Twas bad luck brought us to this house."

Culain started up, insulted. "What do you mean?" he demanded, and his voice was summer thunder.

"Och, it slipped my mind entirely that my sister Dechtire's son, my nephew, Setanta, was to follow after us." And King Conchubar clenched his fists and his knuckles showed white.

Like a cloak Culain's anger dropped from him. "There may yet be time!" he cried. "Come, let us go!"

Fast followed by King Conchubar and the war-

riors of Ulster he ran out into the night, calling . . . calling . . . calling in vain to the hound.

As Setanta rounded the last bend in the bohereen he was chanting the lay of Amergin taught him by Sencha son of Ailill, the learned man.

*I am a wind on the sea,  
I am a wave of the ocean,  
I am the roar of the sea,  
I am a powerful ox,  
I am a hawk on a cliff,  
I am a dewdrop in sunshine,  
I am a boar for valor. . . .*

He got no further. He heard the growl again. He had almost forgotten it. This time it sounded closer, ever so much closer. And it was drawing closer all the time. In those horrible moments his heart missed a beat. Then he remembered the lay he'd been chanting. How was it that line went? "I am a boar for valor," was it? Well, he would be a boar for valor! Drawing himself up to his full height, he stood waiting, ready to give battle. Suddenly two monstrous eyes and a jowled, gaping mouth grew up before him out of the darkness. For a moment his new found courage deserted him and he dropped back a pace. Horribly sure of itself, Culain's hound opened its drooling mouth wider yet and crouched low before leaping. Then Setanta heard voices coming from the house. Help





was on the way. He almost sighed his relief. But the hound heard the voices too and, sensing that it was about to be deprived of its prey, flipped its tail savagely and sprang. As it came at him through the air, Setanta with heaven sent presence of mind, drew back his arm and with all his might flung his silver ball down its slimy, cavernous throat. Taken completely by surprise and almost choking, the hound seemed to hang suspended in midair for the fraction of a second. That was long enough for Setanta. Throwing himself forward, he caught it by its hind legs and swinging it around in a circle, dashed it to the ground where it lay without moving; its head split wide open.

“Brave lad!”

“The young hero!”

“His mother’s son every inch of him!”

“Couldn’t have done better myself!”

“He has the dog in little bits!”

“Do you mind him now as if ’twas nothing!”

“By the gods, he has the makings of a great man; the little lad!”

These were but a few of the praises showered on Setanta by King Conchubar and the men of Ulster. Then, catching him up in his arms, King Conchubar carried him into the house.

One man and one only lingered by the side of the dead hound: Culain. It had meant a great deal

to him that hound had. For years it faithfully protected his property for nothing but its keep. Now he would have to hire a band of watchmen. That would be an expensive proposition; more than he could afford. Silently, unreasonably, he condemned Setanta. He would order him from his house, he vowed. He would be lucky if he did not kill him.

When Culain came back indoors, it was obvious to all that he was in a temper. Pointing to Setanta, "There is no welcome for him here," he growled menacingly.

"What have you against him?" demanded King Conchubar.

"It is that he killed my fine hound that I was grown fond of and that guarded me against robbers."

"'Twas either kill or be killed. Would you have had your hound alive at the expense of your king's own flesh and blood?"

"If you were not guests in my house, he would not leave it alive."

King Conchubar's hand flew to his sword. As one man, the men of Ulster followed his lead. In the heat of that moment anything might have happened. Fortunately, Setanta took it upon himself to intervene. Fearlessly, he crossed the hall to Culain.

"I will make good the wrong I have done you, Culain the smith," he said winningly. "For I have

always admired you and the weapons you make are the best in all Ireland."

"How will you make good the wrong?" demanded Culain.

"It is what I will do, I will find and train you another hound of the same breed and till I do, it is I myself that will guard your place for you."

"You are willing to do that, are you?" For the second time that evening Culain's anger fell from him. Who could be angry in the face of such an offer?

"I am willing." And Setanta gave his hand as his bond.

Culain took it and the tension in the hall eased at once.

Then out spake King Conchubar's father, Cathbad the Druid, "Because of what you have done this day, Setanta, you will henceforth be called Cuchulain."

Setanta did not relish the idea at first.

"Do not gainsay me, lad," chided Cathbad the Druid. "All men will know you by that name."

This put a different complexion on the matter. Setanta gave way without another murmur.

Nor shall we protest. We too accept Cuchulain, which means, of course, the Hound of Culain, and shall use it throughout the remainder of our story.



## CHAPTER FIVE

### *Cuchulain Takes Up Arms*

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WHEN he had kept his promise to Culain the smith, Cuchulain returned to Emain Macha. There he began going to school.

Was he a good scholar?

What was his favorite subject?

Was he ever kept in after hours?

Was he on time mornings?

Did he ever stand in the corner, wearing the dunce's cap?

Poof! A truce with nonsense! It was not that kind of school. Never let it be said that in the Royal School at Emain Macha the pupils were herded like sheep into little pens and stuffed with

knowledge of no earthly use. Each pupil was taught only that which he could understand and all at first learned how to play. (God be with the days!) Yes, they learned to ride, swim, run, play games, build fires, make tents, climb trees, fish and so on. Then they were taught to hurl a spear, to handle horses, to drive a chariot, and they learned the art of self defense and to know not fear but to revere courage both in themselves and others. And they learned how to comport themselves in company. And the bards and the poets and the learned men taught them of their knowledge; each one according to his capabilities. And the druids taught them the mysteries of their religion and the judges their laws. And King Conchubar ruled over the school even as he ruled over Ulster and everything that took place there was known to him.

From the outset, it was evident that Cuchulain was an exceptional pupil. He excelled in everything. Nothing was too difficult for him. But above all else he shone as a warrior. He loved the excitement of the mimic battles staged to test the fitness of the Boy-Corps. None could handle a chariot more skillfully than he—he could turn one in a wheel's breath. And he handled a sword expertly and his spears and his darts and his javelins invariably found their mark.

Came at length the day when he was to take up arms and be received on an equal footing with the warriors of Ulster. He was not really old enough

to take this step. He was only fourteen or thereabouts. But a prophecy uttered by Cathbad the druid egged him on, more or less decided him.

What was this prophecy?

Asked one morning what the day augured, Cathbad after a moment or two of reverie divined, "The youth that takes up arms this day, his name will be honored for all time, but his years will be short."

So soon as Cuchulain heard this—it spread like wildfire among the Boy-Corps—he laid down his hurling stick and went indoors to King Conchubar.

"Greetings, O King!" said he. "I have a request to make of you."

"What is it, lad?"

"It is that I wish to take up arms this day."

"Take up arms, is it?" Slowly, with forefinger and thumb, King Conchubar stroked his beard. "Aren't you a bit young yet? Who gave you the idea?"

"Cathbad the druid."

This, of course, was not the exact truth. But in his enthusiasm, Cuchulain himself had come to believe that it was.

Accustomed to acting on Cathbad's suggestions, King Conchubar relented. "If Cathbad is for it, it must be all right," he granted. Then, rising from his throne, he descended into the well of the room and opened the great chest where was kept a supply of weapons against the time members of the

Boy-Corps grew to manhood. Selecting two spears and a sword, he presented them to Cuchulain.

There was something sacred about that moment. King Conchubar and Cuchulain both felt it. It seemed as if by accepting the weapons, Cuchulain had bidden his childhood farewell. A new feeling sprang up between him and his uncle; an almost brotherly feeling, totally different to the parental feeling which had existed heretofore. Both knew that henceforth they would greet one another not with a kiss but with a handshake.

But then the moment passed as such solemn moments will and Cuchulain took himself out of doors to test his weapons, to see were they worthy of him. It would please us to report that he found them satisfactory. Such, alas, was not the case. First he tested the spears. They cracked and clattered to the ground. His heart fell and his temper rose. Such weapons were an insult to his dignity. However, the sword had yet to be tried. Controlling himself, he suppled the blade. Quivering and gleaming gold in the sunlight, the thin ribbon of steel yielded and curved. But suddenly without any warning there was a sharp report like the crack of a chariot whip. It had snapped. Wrathfully, he flung the broken pieces from him and stormed indoors to his uncle.

In order to appease him, King Conchubar presented him with another, a heavier and stronger set. But these too failed. And so too the next set. And

the next. And the next. And the . . . But why go on? The truth of the matter is that at the end of an hour he had reduced the entire contents of the Boy-Corps's weapon-chest to smithereens. By that time, he was in a veritable paroxysm of rage; indeed, King Conchubar began to entertain grave fears that he would burst a blood vessel. What to do to calm him? he puzzled. There was only one thing to do: give Cuchulain his own weapons. But even his weapons had to undergo the test. Fortunately they stood up and at last Cuchulain was satisfied.

"A blessing on the land that for king has him whose weapons are these!" he cried, delighted with himself.

But in the midst of his rejoicing, Cathbad the druid entered.

"So?" said he. "Is the little lad taking up arms?"

" 'Twould seem so," King Conchubar replied, ruefully eyeing the pile of shattered weapons.

Cathbad heaved a sigh. "It would be better for him had he chosen some other day," he said.

"How so?" demanded King Conchubar. "Was it not you yourself that suggested it?"

"Me? Not me, surely."

Cuchulain fidgeted and lowered his eyes.

"Whelp!" yelled King Conchubar. "Why did you lie to me?"

"O King, stay thy wrath," pleaded Cuchulain. "Although Cathbad may not know it he did indeed

fill me with the idea. He divined this morning that the youth that would take up arms this day, his name would be honored for all time, but his years be short."

"I did. I said that," Cathbad admitted. "Famed far and wide will you be, Cuchulain, but fast fading."

"I care not for that," Cuchulain laughed lightly. "I care not how brief my days so long as my deeds live on after me."

"Let you mount a chariot then," Cathbad instructed. "You have no time to waste in idleness."

When the chariot drew up, Cuchulain leaped in and proceeded to test it. In order to avoid repetition, we shall ask our reader to recall what happened with the weapons. The same thing happened with the chariots. Seventeen chariots in all he wrecked. Finally, King Conchubar had to call out his own charioteer, Iubar macRiangabra. "Iubar," said he, "go yoke my chariot and bring it here."

Iubar soon returned. Yes, even as the king's weapons, the king's chariot had to be tested. Cuchulain tested it first for speed, then for rough usage in battle, then for fording rivers and finally for climbing mountains. That it hung together is a minor miracle. But it did; not so much as a rivet was loosened on it.

"This chariot is worthy of me," Cuchulain pronounced.

"Let the horses be stabled now, will you?" pleaded Iubar.

But Cuchulain had other ideas. He wanted to drive out to the Boy-Corps and have them wish him luck on his taking arms.

Reluctantly Iubar gave way.

Away they went then and after careening madly twice around the lawn, they pulled up short.

The Boy-Corps crowded around.

"I have come for your good wishes on my taking arms," Cuchulain cried.

"You have them and more," voiced the Boy-Corps to a man. "But we are sad at heart to lose so grand a playmate as yourself."

"It had to be."

"May the gods smile on you then. May you have luck in your first slaying. May you enrich yourself with the spoils of war."

"Will you let the horses be stabled now?" interrupted Iubar, who, truth to tell, was anxious to get back to a game of chess he was engaging in with a friend.

"Tell me first," begged Cuchulain, "where does that white road running by us lead?"

"Och, what questions you ask! It leads to the Ford of the Look-Out in Slieve Fuad."

"Why is that name on it?"

"Because every day some great warrior of Ulster is on the lookout there to see that no enemies

sneak over the border and to accept the challenges of warriors of other provinces."

"Who is the lookout for today?"

"If I tell you, will you let me put up the horses?"

"Arrah, tell me who it is, man, and don't be laying conditions on me."

"Ah, I'm thinking it will go hard with him that tries to saddle you with conditions. Connal the Victorious is the lookout for today; a mighty warrior if ever there was one."

"Wouldn't it be the great thing for us to be driving over to see him this fine day?"

"The horses are too tired."

"I'll take the reins myself."

"You will not. Your uncle would be the death of me."

"Take me then."

"I'll take you there, but we must come straight back."

"Drive on, let you."



## CHAPTER SIX

### *Cuchulain Accepts a Challenge*

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IT was a two hour drive; enjoyable every inch of the way; a circumstance we must attribute to the season for it was midsummer. The sky was blue. The sun shone warmly. The air was redolent of wild woodbine and new mown hay. Haws along the way were ripe; red ripe and bursting into yellow. Once in a while a rabbit ran across the road in front of the chariot, making Cuchulain roar with laughter. Their little white tails looked so pert, so saucy. They were gone in a flash, of course. Yet he felt that he would never forget them. Is it not strange how we all remember little things like that and we forgetting more important things all the time? Is it because they so innocently amuse, do you suppose?

But now they were come to a large lake and Cuchulain found himself longing to go in for a swim. Iubar was driving so fast, however, and the horses were gaited so perfectly that he forebore, little dreaming that he was to have his swim later in the day; and what a swim, a swim for his life! Presently they came across another, a smaller lake.

Joined to the first by a thin thread of a stream, a river flowed out of this lake and where it did, they beheld the Ford of the Look-Out: their destination.

Iubar slithered the horses to an abrupt halt. Cuchulain leaped down from the chariot.

Sure enough, there stood Connal the Victorious and he on guard. He was a handsome looking man and his armored tunic and close-fitting bronze cap added rather than detracted from his looks.

“Greetings!” he cried. Cuchulain moved toward him impulsively.

Connal did not reply for a moment, but examined him closely from head to toe. Then he began to laugh and said, “Ho, hoho! Is it arms you are after taking, little lad?”

“It is.” Cuchulain was visibly discomfited, as who would not be?

“I am of the opinion that you have taken them up before your time,” chuckled Connal.

“Is that so?” Cuchulain let the slur pass and changing the conversation asked, “And what are you killing the time of day here for?”

It was Connal’s turn to flush. “It is not killing the time of day but guarding the province, I am. Were it not for me all Ulster would wake up dead in the morning.”

“Would you consider letting me take your place for this one day?” Cuchulain asked.

“Let you take my place, is it? Yerra, you would

be as chaff before the wind if a foe but cast his shadow in this direction."

Cuchulain fairly purpled. "If that is what you think," he blurted out, "I must be off to the shadows of Lough Echtera in search of a challenge. 'Twould be unseemly for me to return to Emain Macha without blooding my weapons."

"Hold on and I'll go with you," hastily proffered Connal. The shadows of Lough Echtera was enemy and therefore highly dangerous territory. He did not like to think of Cuchulain venturing there alone.

But Cuchulain rejected his offer. "I do not need a nurse," he said, mounting again the chariot.

"I'll go all the same," Connal insisted.

"You'll have to catch me first." And bending down, Cuchulain picked up a goad and prodded the horses off to a flying start.

In a thrice Connal yoked his chariot and set out after him.

Whether Iubar drove Cuchulain as fast as he might have done on this occasion is open to grave doubt. This though is certain, Connal rapidly made up for lost ground and in another five minutes would have caught up with them had not Cuchulain decided to be rid of him.

"Pull up!" he bade Iubar.

Iubar gladly obeyed, thinking it was to wait for Connal.

Instead, Cuchulain vaulted to the ground and

picked up a stone the size of his fist. Taking careful aim, he flung it at the yoke of Connal's fast approaching chariot. The yoke snapped and down came the chariot with a crash, hurtling Connal to the ground with such force that his chin was twisted back of his left shoulder.

"What is the meaning of this?" wailed he, righting himself as best he could.

"I wanted to show you that I am not too young to take up arms," Cuchulain called back, "and I wanted to let you see that I am well able to take care of myself."

"A murrain on yourself and your arms!" Connal retaliated. "You can go now to your death. I'll not raise a finger to save you; no, not if you were to be killed twice over."

"Good," said Cuchulain.

The next minute he had Iubar driving hell for leather for Lough Echtera.

Alas, when they got there not hide sight nor hair of a foe was to be seen. Cuchulain walked clear around the lake three times. He was about to go 'round again, but Iubar stopped him. Said he, "Let us return now. Already the noonday meal is in preparation and there is great hunger entirely gnawing at me. It is all right for you to dawdle. King Conchubar will save your place. But I must take pot luck and if I am not in on time no one will think to save me anything."

Reluctantly, Cuchulain gave way. He did not

despair of engaging in mortal combat, however, before he was come again to Emain Macha.

They went back a different way. Iubar knew the country so well, he had all the short cuts off by heart. They would be home in less than an hour, he assured Cuchulain. But then Cuchulain saw Finncairn.

Finncairn?

Finncairn was a white cairn atop a mountain to the left of the road.

But what is a cairn?

It is a mound of stones raised high over a grave; in this instance over that of Finn. Everybody who visited there or passed by during the course of the day threw a stone on it—it was held bad luck not to—and as the years rolled by it grew and grew until it could be seen for miles.

“Let us drive up to it,” Cuchulain proposed.

“Let us do no such a-thing,” Iubar retorted sharply. “It is too far out of the way and besides the great hunger on me, I am tired unto death.”

“You are a lazy fellow, Iubar,” Cuchulain jeered. “Is it refusing me my requests on this my first day of taking arms you would be?”

“It is.”

Cuchulain tried coaxing. “Good Iubar,” he pleaded, “drive now as I tell you and let you be showing me the whole of Ulster from the cairnside that I may know my way about in future and not have to be plaguing the life out of you.”

Iubar repressed a groan. There was no resisting Cuchulain once he started coaxing.

"Tell me now," said Cuchulain when they had made the steep climb, "what is the name on yonder meadowed plain?"

"Mag Breagh," Iubar told him.

"Point out to me its duns and strongholds."

"Wirra, wirra! What next?" deplored Iubar, complying nevertheless and showing him the hill of Teamhair over Tara south of the Boyne, the seat of the High-Kings of Ireland.

"And west of it?" plied Cuchulain.

"West of it is the Tailteann plain where great games are held every year in honor of the mother of Lu, the Deliverer, who is worshipped there."

"And over there?" said Cuchulain, pointing.

"Is Cleathra."

"And that brightly sheening dun yonder by the Boyneside?"

"That? Oh, let you not mind that."

"Why so?"

"'Tis an enchanted place. The demons of war hold sway there and terrible are their spells."

"Tell me whose dun it is, Iubar." No request this, but a demand.

Iuber relented. "It is the dun of the sons of Nechtan Sceine."

"The dun of the sons of Nechtan Sceine?" mused Cuchulain. "Is it not the sons of Nechtan Sceine that boast the number of Ulstermen alive

does not exceed the number they have killed?"

"It is. And they are fierce and awful to behold and the demons of war are their slaves and their battle-fury unequalled throughout the length and breadth of the land."

"Say no more, but drive me there."

"Is it out of your mind you are?"

"Drive me to them!" Threateningly Cuchulain fingered King Conchubar's mighty spear which appropriately enough was called the Venomous.

Venomous it must have seemed to Iubar. "I'll go. I'll go," he stammered. Forthwith he lashed up the horses and the thunder of their going was an awesome thing to be listening to, so it was. 'Twas like rain on tin sheeting only worse, a thousand times worse.

When at length they arrived at the dun of the sons of Nechtan Sceine, Cuchulain saw a stone set in the lawn. It was a pillar stone with an iron band about it and writing on it in Ogham characters which he quickly deciphered. It read:

NO MAN THAT COMES HERE CARRYING  
ARMS SHALL LEAVE WITHOUT  
CHALLENGING ONE OF US,  
THE SONS OF NECHTAN SCEINE

Here, at last, was a challenge; one he would not, could not ignore. And to show his scorn for the sons of Nechtan Sceine, he threw his arms about the pillar, lifted it from its place and with a mighty

heave hurled it into the nearby lake where it sank with a splash and a gurgling sound.

Well!

Iubar, of course, was aghast and pale about the gills. In a breathless sort of way he said, "You have done nothing that is good. You have sealed your doom."

But Cuchulain did not think so. He felt his battle-fury rising in him and in order to conserve his energy until such time as the sons of Nechtan Sceine would come forth girth for combat, he ordered Iubar lay out the chariot coverings and wrapping himself up well, he was soon sound asleep.

Iubar looked at him once and a lump rose in his throat when he saw that he had his silver ball clutched in his hand. "Ah, the poor child," he sighed. "He's going to need a stronger weapon than that to overcome the sons of Nechtan Sceine."

Meanwhile the sons of Nechtan Sceine were having an argument. They had lost count of whose turn it was to go down to the pillar.

"It is my turn!" cried Foill.

"When did you go last?" argued Tuachall.

"Let us draw lots!" suggested Fainnle, the youngest of the three.

The other two agreed. Whereupon Fainnle went out and plucked three straws of different lengths from the rick. "The short straw goes," he said, setting the conditions.

Tuachall drew first, then Foill; Fainnle opened his hand on the remaining straw.

"I have it! I have the short one!" Foill roared, his stubbled, fat-lipped mouth well nigh drooling with anticipation.

His brothers measured to make sure.

He had it all right.

"Go let you then," they counselled him, "and kill anyone waiting there and cut off his head and bring it in when you come for us to see."

"If he has red hair, his head is yours, Tuachall," Foill laughed wickedly, "if black, it's yours, Fainkle, but if it's fair I'll keep it myself." And with that he went out.

Iubar saw him coming and trembled at the sight. He was a walking mountain. No, he wasn't either. He was a giant spider; ugly, cunning, repulsive, treacherous, evil.

"Whose horses have you there, charioteer?" he bellowed.

"They belong to Conchubar, King of Ulster," Iubar chattered.

"I thought I recognized them. Who brought them here? And . . . and who tore up our pillar?"

Iubar trembled all over. He had never heard such an awful voice. "Oh, a little bit of a lad," he answered at last, "a little bit of a lad that took up arms this day and is up to all sorts of mischief. But sure there isn't a bit of harm in him. You know what young lads are."

"Where is he?"

"Over there in the chariot wrappings sleeping his head off."

Foill cast a malevolent eye in the direction indicated. "Hum," he grunted. "Took up arms did he? If I thought he had it in him to put up any sort of a decent fight at all, I'd send him home headless."

"You would, would you?"

To Iubar's dismay, Cuchulain suddenly sat up. He had been shamming sleep ever since Foill's arrival.

"I challenge you!" he shouted, his battle-fury rising.

"Accepted," leered Foill. He was not in the habit of fighting children, but when nothing else offered he had to do something to keep in trim.

"Where are your weapons?" demanded Cuchulain.

Somewhat disconcerted Foill admitted to having come without them.

"Go get them," ordered Cuchulain. "I do not slay servants nor messengers nor unarmed men at any time."

Gritting his teeth, Foill hurried off. He would be back in a minute, he promised grimly.



## CHAPTER SEVEN

### *The Fate of the Sons of Nechtan Sceine*

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WHILE Foill was retrieving his weapons, Iubar advised Cuchulain in this wise:

“This Foill you are up against is a dangerous customer. They do be saying he is enchanted, that he can’t be wounded by a pointed or edged weapon of any kind.”

Serious news was this indeed! Was Foill a second Achilles? Had he too been dipped in the Styx? But even Achilles was vulnerable. Paris proved that when he slayed him with an arrow that pierced his heel. Foill must have a vulnerable point too, Cuchulain reasoned. There must be some weapon that would slay him. And it was

then that he bethought himself of his silver ball that Iubar had ridiculed beknownst to him while he slept.

But here came Foill. He had his armor buckled on. In his left hand he carried a curved, body-length shield; in his right a sharp-edged sword shone evilly.

"Are you ready?" cried he.

"Ready," Cuchulain bravely returned.

With the battle cry of his clan on his lips, Foill charged.

You could not see what happened for dust. You could but hear the clash of steel against steel.

Iubar, watching anxiously, felt perspiration breaking out on his forehead and he clenched his fists and buried his nails deep in the palms of his hands.

Ah! Cuchulain had weathered the first attack. Now they were circling 'round and around. Naught was visible of Foill except his coal black eyes fierce and flaming behind his shield. Each was sizing the other up, each looking for the fatal opening that spelled Death.

Oh, to have been there! To have been able to cheer Cuchulain on! To hurrah his every move! He was only a boy; a boy fighting against desperate odds.

Aw, crafty Foill! Each time he circled around, he drew closer to Cuchulain. Cuchulain never took his eyes off him. But was he aware of the gradual

lessening of ground between them? Why, Foill was almost within sword reach! Any moment, he might lunge and all would be over.

Poor Iubar could watch no longer. Burying his head in the crook of his arm, he prayed his gods.

All of a sudden, Cuchulain began to retreat. Foill pressed his advantage and pursued him. His blood literally boiling, Cuchulain began to run.

Run away, is it?

I should say not. He had to have room to throw his silver ball. So much depended on it. If he failed, it was all up with him. There! now the time was ripe. Turning in his tracks, he wound up his arm. Then, closing one eye, he took aim and flung.

Hearing the nerve wracking, the awful, the horrible sound of splintering bone, Iubar was almost afraid to open his eyes. But the temptation proved too great. He had to know the outcome sooner or later anyway. Palsied with anxiety, he took a look. He looked again. Dear knows, he wanted to believe what he saw, but it did not seem possible. Could that really be Foill lying there on the ground; a hole the size of a man's fist tunnelled through his head? Or were his eyes deceiving him? Which? Whisth, there was Cuchulain cutting off the head and fixing it to his belt. Then . . . then . . . then it was true! It was Foill that was down! It was! It was! Unable to contain himself any longer, he broke out and danced a jig on the sward.

Unfortunately, it is now our unpleasant duty

to return to Foill's brothers, Tuachall and Fainnle. Already they had begun to question his long absence. It had never taken him this long to polish off a challenger before. Could anything have happened? But no, that was impossible. And yet . . . ?

"I'll go see what's keeping him," volunteered Tuachall.

When he came to the lawn, he stood and looked down at the decapitated body of his brother for a moment or two. Slowly, the livid hues of anger raced tide-like up his neck and into his face, blotching his cheeks and rendering him truly hideous to the eye.

"You did this?" he said, turning on Cuchulain and his voice was menacing and deadly.

"I did," owned Cuchulain and he yet in the throes of his battle-fury.

Tuachall spat on the ground. "I suppose you think you have done a great thing, something to boast about?" he taunted.

"There is nothing to boast of in slaying one man," said Cuchulain.

"And even if there were, you would not live to boast of it. It is I myself that will be revenged on you," threatened Tuachall.

"Go get your weapons!" Cuchulain cried. "I do not slay servants nor messengers nor unarmed men at any time."

While he was gone, Iubar advised Cuchulain as

before. "If you are to make an end of Tuachall at all," he prompted, "it must be by the first stroke of whatever weapon you use, for he is enchanted too and famed for his skill at dodging. You will not be able, no matter how hard you try, to touch him a second time."

"Leave him to me, Iubar," raged Cuchulain. "It is King Conchubar's mighty spear, the Venomous, I will use against him."

Then Tuachall came forth. He was clothed in armor from head to toe and the weapons he carried were javelins; javelins razor-sharp.

Even if he were fortunate enough to escape the javelins, how was Cuchulain to pierce his armor? Verily, it was of a thickness unpierceable.

This thought must also have occurred to Iubar, for he began to wail, "Ulla gulla, gulla g'one," he wailed. "Ulla gulla, gulla g'one."

Ulla gulla, gulla g'one, indeed! Tuachall had begun to hurl the javelins. Winged messengers of destruction, they rode the air faster than snipe; showers of them. You would say they could not fail to make Cuchulain their pincushion. And yet they did. How is a mystery? Cuchulain, to be sure, darted hither and thither, cutting a zig zag course here and there, leaping high, flattening himself against the ground, fleeing to the right and left and hurling himself through the air, relating himself to the hare by reason of his miraculous bounds. Then happened the inevitable. Tuachall ran out of jav-

lins and Cuchulain changed his tactics. Clutching the Venomous, no longer dodging but advancing in a straight line, he bore down on Tuachall. Was there one weak link in that armor? If there was, the Venomous would find it out. Within hurling distance, he brandished the royal weapon aloft, then drawing back his arm with great deliberation and accuracy, he sped the spear on its way.

“Hurray!” It was Iubar cheering.

“Hurray!” This time it was Cuchulain.

And now we are going to permit ourselves a cheer. “Hurray! Brave, brave Cuchulain!”

The Venomous had found the one weak link in Tuachall’s armor. It pierced him over the breast, penetrated his heart and smashed three of his ribs. He fell without a cry: stone dead.

A minute later two heads hung from Cuchulain’s belt where before there was but one.

But one?

Those words have a significant ring.

Has it not occurred to you that there was but one left to take? Fainnle’s.

It has to Cuchulain. Iubar tries to dissuade him, but he is wasting his time. Cuchulain’s battle-fury has now reached fever pitch. His face is crimson. His eyes gleam. Every pulse in his body throbs at an alarming rate. Actually, he is quivering with rage. “I will have all three heads or none!” he storms. “The sons of Nechtan Sceine are better off dead. They are evil men. They radiate malice as

the sun does heat. They are in league with demons and sorcerers . . .”

“But,” Iubar interrupts, “Fainnle is more dangerous than the other two together.”

“So much the better.”

“Well, if you are determined,” and here Iubar shakes his head in great despair, “if you are determined and I see you are, let me give you an advice. Fainnle is a swimmer. That is why he has been named for the swallow. He flits over water like the lightning of the gods. It may be that he will ask you to fight in the lake yonder, and you will have to be faster than a northeaster to get the best of him. Mark me well now, speed is the great thing with Fainnle; *speed!*”

Cuchulain snorts indignantly and exclaims, “Is it to me you say the like of that, Iubar? Know you not that when the Boy-Corps goes in for a swim I take a lad on each shoulder and a lad on each hand and so fast do I cross the river Callan I do not even wet my ankles?”

“Faith now, if you can do that same you stand a good chance against Fainnle,” Iubar is quick to admit.

The words are but out of his mouth when Fainnle appears on the scene. Seeing his brothers stretched lifeless, headless and bleeding, he vows instant revenge. Fixing Cuchulain with a baneful stare, “My brothers were as babes in arms compared to me and it is me you have to contend with now,” he says.

"Go get your weapons," Cuchulain retorts. "I do not slay servants nor messengers nor unarmed men at any time."

Quickly Fainnle goes and quickly returns.

"Come out with me now into the lake," he suggests, "and we will fight it out."

Unsheathing his sword, Cuchulain wades out into the water.

Did we not say earlier that he was to have his swim before the day was out; a swim for his life?

Far out into the lake where the waters are fathoms deep they go. Without a word of warning, Fainnle dives suddenly. Swallow? He should have been named for the otter. Down, down he goes, twisting and turning, intent on coming up behind Cuchulain. But now Cuchulain has dived. Iubar on the shore watches and prays. The water begins to churn and spray flies high in bubbling, white cascades. Are they fighting it out under the water? It seems so. But no, there they are now; the two of them, coming up for air. Dog-like Cuchulain treads the water, watching Fainnle closely, trying to anticipate his next move. When he is least expecting it, Fainnle hurls himself across the water at him. Swiftly, he turns on his back and kicks out desperately. Blinded by the splashing foam, Fainnle retreats. Again the two rest. Iubar shouts encouraging words to Cuchulain from the shore. They affect him as a goad. Throwing all caution to the winds, he quickly crosses the intervening space. But where is Fainnle? The rascal is slip-

perier than an eel. He must have plunged below again. Thrashing the water with his sword, Cuchulain guards against a surprise attack. Suddenly he feels a swirling in the water about his feet. Fainnle is coming at him from below. Plunging his sword deep down, Cuchulain spins himself around like a top. Fainnle spies the fastly revolving blade in his hand. He tries to draw back. But too late. His neck is smote a mortal blow. His breath escapes in bubbles. Water takes its place. Reaching down, Cuchulain grasps and completely severs his head. His body floats away and it spewing blood on the now calm waters.

And now Cuchulain has waded ashore. The three heads dangle from his belt. Iubar runs up to embrace him. But Cuchulain pushes him to one side. He has work to do yet. Crossing the green sward where lay the bodies of Foill and Tuachall, he makes for the dun. With his sword he smites the doors and they burst open. Crossing the great hall, the scene of many a debauch of the sons of Nechtan Sceine, he takes a burning ember from the fireplace. From room to room, he goes setting the place afire. We leave him in the act, for he will not rest content until every trace of his hideous foes has been erased.



## CHAPTER EIGHT

### *The Hero Returns*

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WHEN Cuchulain quitted the scene of his great victory and set out for Emain Macha, he was still laboring under the spell of his battle-fury. It had not abated a whit. He would have liked to battle all over again for his life. The way he felt he could have vanquished an army. Perhaps it is just as well he did not run into one or he might have. Passing Slieve Fuad, however, he caught sight of a herd of deer. They were not ordinary deer. He would not have bothered with them if they were. They were twice as big and haloed each one with an aura of white fire. What deer could they be? He asked Iubar.

"They belong to the gods," said Iubar. "It is unlawful even to look at them."

"Give them chase! Give them chase!" clamored Cuchulain.

But Iubar was slow to obey. He was frightened. So Cuchulain seized the reins from him and away they flew. Lord, what a chase! You should have been there. Through a sylvan glen and off across a dark brown moor it led. The deer were obvi-

ously making for a stream on the far side of the moor. Most always deer make for water when pursued. When there are dogs in the hunt this stratagem is usually effective, for the dogs lose the scent. But here were no dogs. Still the deer seemed likely to escape, for the horses were tiring fast. Realizing this, Cuchulain decided on a daring move. Relinquishing the reins, he leaped from the chariot. We have said, and not unadvisedly, in an earlier chapter, that he could run fleet as a deer. He now set out to substantiate, to prove this. Over the ground, he sped at a tremendous pace. To Iubar it seemed that he was flying. Maybe he was. But running or flying he was gaining on the deer and that was the main thing. In an effort to shake him off, the deer suddenly swerved sharply to the right. But Cuchulain must have anticipated this move, for he swerved at an even sharper angle and gained by the maneuver. Speeding forward then in a last magnificent spurt worthy of a Cunningham, a Bronthon, a Lovelock, he drew abreast of the herd. With outstretched arms, he flung himself among them. Two stags bellied the dust. Fearlessly, he gripped them by the antlers. His grip was a vice. They tried to shake him off. But they couldn't. Exhausted and breathing heavily, they suffered themselves to be led back to the chariot where Iubar helped make them fast with thongs.

Upon resuming their journey, Cuchulain chanced to see, flying up ahead in "V" formation, a flock of

swans, but swans of a whiteness, of a beauty such as he did not know existed.

"Are they tame birds?" he wanted to know.

"They're as wild as yourself," groused Iubar, "and you had better steer clear of them."

"Would it reflect to my credit if I brought some of them back to Emain Macha?" Cuchulain pursued, ignoring the warning.

"Let us not delay but keep on; night is falling fast around us," pleaded Iubar.

"Whether it would be better for me to bring them in alive or dead, I don't know," Cuchulain puzzled.

"Oh, as to that," sighed Iubar reconciling himself to the inevitable, "it would be best to take them alive. Plenty there are that bring them in dead, but alive that no one has ever done."

As the chariot bowled along, Cuchulain drew forth his sling. He was a veritable David with a sling. Placing a round stone in the pouch, he twirled it around three times taking aim. Then he let go. As the stone came against them, the swans let out a frightened hiss that was heard for miles and eight of their number came tumbling down; all alive, wounded only in one wing.

"Good shot!" Iubar cried.

"I can do better," said Cuchulain.

Placing another stone in the sling, he tried again.

He made good his boast. He did do better; indeed he did. This time twice as many—sixteen to

give the figure—fell to his aim; all alive as before, wounded only in one wing.

“I have enough now,” he said. “Let you go pick them up, Iubar.”

Iubar refused point blank.

“Why won’t you go?” Cuchulain demanded.

“The horses are going too fast to be pulled up and if I leave the chariot and they in motion they will break gait impaling me on the wheel knives or what is worse on the antlers of the deer there.” And he indicated the deer running along beside the chariot with a doleful nod of the head.

“You are chicken hearted, Iubar,” scoffed Cuchulain. “But go retrieve the birds anyway. It is I myself that will fix such a fierce look on both horse and deer that the one will not venture to break gait and the other will bow their heads for very fear.”

Somewhat reassured, Iubar vaulted gingerly from the chariot, landing safely. Ropes and other bindings he took with him and when he came back he had the swans tied in such skillful fashion, not one of their feathers was even ruffled. Leaping back into the chariot, he resumed his place at the reins, swearing solemnly and impressively that he would not stop again unless it was at Emain Macha.

Now, there was a woman at Emain Macha and Leborcam was the name on her, Leborcam daughter of Aed. Conversation woman to King Conchubar was she and it oftentimes happened that she took

long walks in the hills. Perhaps she found there among the vast heights and terrible silences the inspiration that fitted her for her calling. But be that as it may, on her way home from one such walk, she saw from a hilltop a chariot racing across the plain towards Emain Macha and as quickly as she could go she went with the news to King Conchubar, for it was a frightening sight.

"I have seen with mine own two eyes," she reported half fearfully, "a fierce chariot fighter coming in this direction. Bleeding heads hang down from his belt. Wild stags tethered follow after him. Swans whiter than snow on the hedges lie at his feet and there is about him a fierce and terrible look of battle-fury such as I have not seen on man nor beast in all my three tens of years."

King Conchubar leaped to his feet and summoned his warriors.

"Go men," he bade them, "and head off this fierce fighter. I myself will follow after you to give him battle if need be."

The warriors needed no second bidding. Greatly excited, they ran to the Speckled House for their weapons, wrenching them from the racks in their haste.

They were just about to start out when they were recalled.

Wonderingly and a trifle dispiritedly, for they had not had a good fight for over a week, they filed back into the king's compartment.

"Put away your weapons, men," said King Conchubar and there were tears of laughter in his brown eyes. "It has come to me that this fierce chariot-fighter is none other than my nephew, Cuchulain. He took up arms today and from what Leborcam tells me, I judge that he has acquitted himself well."

But then Leborcam spoke out, saying, "O King, you had best find some means of quenching his battle-fury else when he comes among us there will be harm done. I do not have to tell you that warriors when the battle-fury is in their veins scarce can tell a friend from a foe. You have experienced it yourself, O King."

And King Conchubar replied deferentially, "You are a wise woman, Leborcam daughter of Aed. What would you suggest we do?"

Leborcam thought for a moment before whispering her advice in the royal ear.

"You are a twice wise woman," lauded King Conchubar.

The closer they came to Emain Macha, the fiercer raged the battle-fury in Cuchulain's breast. He himself was not conscious of this. But then which of us is ever conscious of being tempersome even? Temper must die first. It simply does not occur to us before. We are too wrought up, too wholly occupied with venting our spleen. Iubar, however, was well aware of Cuchulain's condition and not a

little frightened by it. From time to time he muttered incantations to the gods, pleading with them to restore Cuchulain to himself again, to crush the flames of fury igniting him and if he be in any way infected by the demons that inhabited the sons of Nechtan Sceine to drive them out of him. And what did his gods reply? Nothing, unless it be that Leborcam daughter of Aed was their agent and through her were his prayers to be answered.

The gates of Emain Macha were clearly in sight now. The horses, tired though they were, increased their pace. The stables! Oats! A straw bed fet-lock deep! All were within reach. So well they might gallop. Cuchulain gloried in this last mad dash. It seemed a fitting conclusion to his day. But what was happening? Why were the gates being closed against him? And who were these people in a state of half undress coming towards him?

Ah, reader sing the glory of the women of Ulster! And sing their courage and their beauty! At Leborcam's instigation, they had divested themselves of their upper garments and come to meet Cuchulain, to stay his battle-fury. Leborcam had told them, "Cuchulain is yet a tender youth. He is modest and easily shamed. The sight of your beauty, O Women of Ulster, will make him blush and wish to hide himself."

And it was even as Leborcam said.

When Cuchulain laid eyes on the women of Ul-

ster coming towards him, he dropped his weapons and buried his face in his hands.

Then did the women of Ulster seize hold of him and immerse him in a cauldron of cold water. But such was the heat of his battle-fury that the water boiled about him and the cauldron burst into a thousand pieces. Another cauldron was quickly forthcoming. This time the cauldron held together; the water, however, boiled over as before. Another immersion was necessary.

After this third immersion, Cuchulain's battle-fury was completely cooled and the women of Ulster dressed him in a shirt of gold and a green cloak with a silver clasp and on his feet placed hand embroidered deerskin sandals.

Leborcam then conducted him to King Conchubar. His trophies were brought in with him and the moon was setting and the sun rising ere he made an end of the tale of his adventures.

PART Two  
THE WOOING OF EMER





## CHAPTER NINE

### *Cuchulain Visits Emer*

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AND now we are going to skip a few years, years in which Cuchulain furthered his ambition to become a great warrior whose renown would echo down the ages, enthroning him forever in the hearts of the Irish people; a very Titan of Courage and Chivalry. To be sure he did not escape unscathed the hand of Time during those years. He grew up in them. No longer a child, no more a boy, we meet him now a young man.

A young man! Yes. And an adventuresome young man at that. Too much so, King Conchubar thought. He could not help recalling the prophecy of Cathbad the druid, and since he loved

Cuchulain it frightened him to think of that early death preordained for him. If only he could restrain Cuchulain from needlessly risking his life. But how was he to do it? Cuchulain was so brave, so courageous he would surely laugh at anyone who advised him to be cautious. It was not until he laid the matter before Sencha son of Ailill, the learned man, that a way out of the dilemma presented itself.

“Why not marry him with some fair, young maiden worthy of him?” was Sencha’s suggestion.

That sounded like a sensible idea to King Conchubar. A wife would have a steady influence over Cuchulain and by-and-by maybe there would be little ones; an added responsibility.

Accordingly, on a morning not many days later, King Conchubar dispatched nine trustworthy men to comb Ireland from north to south for a maiden fit to be the wife of Cuchulain.

A year later to the very day the nine men returned. Failure set their faces so abjectly that there was no need to question them. They had an excuse of course. They held it impossible to find a maiden possessed of the six gifts Cuchulain had named and they starting out. Four of them—yes. Five—well maybe. But all six—poof!

But on this score Cuchulain defended himself stoutly. Such a maiden did exist, he protested. Had not he himself found her while they were dawdling about the countryside? He had; indeed

he had and what was more he was leaving to woo her without further delay.

The nine men were left without words.

Cuchulain called for his chariot and ran off to dress himself in his finest raiment while the chariot was being yoked.

It might be a good idea for us to start out ahead of him. Frankly we are curious to see the gifted maiden he has chosen for his bride.

Our road leads us southward, down country to King Forgall Manach the Wily's lush province of Lusk.

There we find the royal palace set in Luglochta Loga, the Garden of Lugh, so called in honor of Cuchulain's immortal father, the Sun-god. And on the lawn before the palace we see Emer the Fair, the king's daughter, and she instructing her sisters in the delicate art of fine needlework. It is she that Cuchulain has found, for she and she alone in all the land is possessed of the six gifts of Chastity, Wisdom, Beauty, Voice, Sweet Speech and that which she is presently engaged at, the gift of Fine Needlework.

We have not arrived a minute too soon. Hear the rumble of that chariot in the distance? Emer has heard it.

"Go one of you," she begged her sisters, "and see who it is that comes so swiftly in this direction."

Lithesome Fiall ran to do her bidding.

When she came back she was breathless and

wide-eyed with excitement. "Guess what I have seen?" she panted.

"What?" cried Emer.

Fiall brushed back a straying strand of her raven hair. "I have seen two fine horses galloping side by side, their manes flowing free on the wind. One is a grey, a spirited beast; the other a black, a darling of a horse with white starred forehead and eyes flashing amber fire as he speeds along."

"What else?" prompted Emer.

"I have seen a chariot rolling on wheels of white bronze. Copper its frame is; gold its yoke; the reins yellow colored and gleaming; the shafts straight and slender."

"Is that all?" mourned Emer.

Fiall laughed softly. It pleased her to tease her sister. "A beautiful youth arrayed in costliest raiment rides the chariot," she divulged, "and with him is his charioteer, a man reed thin with flaming red hair and freckled countenance."

"But the youth," Emer pleaded, "tell us more of him."

"Oh, the youth," teased Fiall. "Why, he wears a cloak of crimson silk over a white-hooded shirt embroidered in red and gold. In his right hand he carries a goad with which to prod the horses to greater speed. Beside him rests a spear and as he came near I glimpsed his face. 'Tis dimpled with four dimples of different hue. His brows are as if charcoaled; his teeth lustered like pearls. The

finest gold threads in our sewing baskets compare not to his hair. His eyes . . . ? His eyes . . . ?” She hesitated, lost for a comparison.

“His eyes?” Emer could not bear the delay.

“Sapphires!” exulted Fiall. “Sapphires! Twin sapphires sparkling lovelight.”

A delicate blush suffused Emer’s pale cheeks. She guessed who it was. Yet she was careful to hide the knowledge from her sisters. They would have told her father and he, planning as he was to marry her to a neighboring king, would most surely disapprove.

But there was Cuchulain driving onto the lawn now. Catching sight of Emer, he stood still for a moment before leaving the chariot to drink in the freshness of her beauty. Then, out of the fullness of his heart, he called a tender greeting.

Here we must point out that the ensuing conversation was spoken in a code intelligible only to Cuchulain and Emer themselves. This, no doubt, was arranged at their first meeting of which we have been unable to find any record. As lovers will, they spoke of themselves.

“Tell me something of yourself, fair maiden,” Cuchulain pleaded.

“There is so little to tell. As befitting the daughter of a king. I have been brought up in the virtues of chastity and lawful behavior. In me, ’tis said, are combined all the graces of the women of Erin.”

"All the graces and more," complimented Cuchulain.

"And I have champions to guard me from those who seek to woo and carry me off against my father's wishes," Emer added.

"Who would those champions be now?" asked Cuchulain.

"They are twenty strong. Eight are named Connal. Three answer to Luath; two to Lui. Then there are Lath Gouble, son of Tethra, and Brian and Bolor and Triath and Bason, son of Omanch, and Trescath and my own brother, Conn."

"Do you not hold me equal to those champions?" Cuchulain wanted to know.

"It might be that I would, did I but know your deeds," Emer replied.

"I will tell them to you," Cuchulain volunteered readily enough. "When my strength is weakest, I subdue twenty. A third part of my strength suffices to rout thirty. By myself I give combat to forty. Led by me an hundred are safe. Because of me champions desert the battlefield. Whole armies flee panic stricken before my very gaze."

"For a youth those deeds are praiseworthy," Emer admitted graciously. "But you are not yet of the strength of a chariot chief."

"I swear to you I will be, O maiden. My deeds will be sung by the poets."

"Tell me of your rearing, noble youth."

"I have been well brought up by my uncle, King Conchubar. My days have been spent among chariot chiefs and champions. Druids, poets and learned men are numbered among my companions, and I have sat with the nobles and great land-owners of Ulster till I learned their manners and their gifts."

"Truly, you have had a royal upbringing."

"We have both had a royal upbringing, O maiden. We are of a kind. Do you not therefore think it fitting that we should become one?"

"Alas, my father would frown on such an union. Besides there are conditions set for him who would woo me."

"What are the conditions, O maiden?"

"He who would woo me must first overcome a hundred warriors from the Ford of Scenn Menn at Ollbin to the Ford of Banchuing Arcait."

"Is that all, O maiden?"

"No, noble youth. He who would woo me must also go without sleep from the end of summer to the beginning of spring and from the beginning of spring till May-day and from then till the beginning of winter."

"I accept the conditions, O maiden."

"And I . . . I will accept you when you have fulfilled them."

"Emer!"

"What is it, Cuchulain?"

"Look at me."

“I am looking.”

“There is a world of joy before us.”

“A world of joy! But you must go now. You must not be seen here.”

“Fear not for me. But if it is your pleasure, I will go. I will come again soon.”

“Farewell till then, Cuchulain.”

“Fairwell Emer, thou fairest of all fair maidens.”

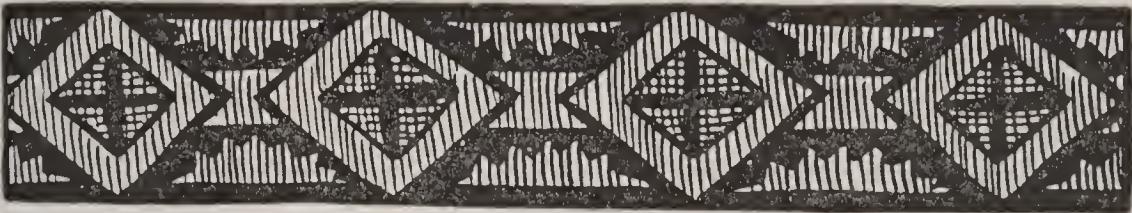
And with that, Cuchulain mounted his chariot and away with him.

Alas, when Emer’s sisters went indoors it is the great talk entirely they made about Emer and the handsome stranger. Presently, King Forgall Manach the Wily gave ear to what they were saying.

“Ah,” he divined, “the mad boy from Emain Macha has been here. The description fits no other. Doubtless, Emer has lost her heart to him and it is what I must do, I must put a swift end to their nonsense.”

Scowling and with half-closed eyes glinting evilly, he laid his plans.

Och, he was well named “Wily.”



## CHAPTER TEN

### *The Ambassador*

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CUCHULAIN was not long back at Emain Macha when there arrived at the palace a distinguished foreigner; an ambassador from the King of Gaul, he held himself to be. Came he to Ulster to confer with King Conchubar on matters of state and to present him with offerings of gold and works of art and wine of the Gallic grape.

Ordinarily the most hospitable of kings, King Conchubar outdid himself on this occasion. The best was hardly good enough for his guest. From morn till night for three whole days, he entertained him regally. On the morning of the third day he formally presented him to Cuchulain, Fergus macRogh, Connal the Victorious, and others of the warriors of Ulster, following a magnificent display of their battle feats for his benefit. That the ambassador was impressed by their skill was evident to all. As the warriors passed in review before him, he showered them with praise. When he came to Cuchulain, however, he laid a fatherly, or perhaps patronising would be a better word; yes, it is; he laid a patronising arm about his shoulders

and said, "Now, here is a young man not yet fully developed. He should go to Scotland and study under Donnal the Soldiery and Scatach, the woman warrior. They will teach him all he needs to know to make him a truly great warrior; nay, a hero, for is he not patterned like a hero?"

Cuchulain felt mortified. And yet, he reasoned, perhaps what the ambassador said was true. Even Emer had told him that he was not yet of the strength of a chariot chief. Well, he would accept the ambassador's advice. He would go to Scotland. He would leave at once. But no, first he would see Emer and explain to her what had happened.

Thanking the ambassador for his interest and advice, he turned away towards the stables. In less time than it takes to tell, he was on his way to Luglochta Loga.

Upon his arrival, he found Emer troubled of countenance and nigh to tears.

"I know why you have come," she sighed wearily. "You are going to Scotland."

Cuchulain was taken aback. "But who can have told you?" he gasped.

Emer brushed away a tear. "It was my father that went in disguise as an ambassador to Emain Macha. He is against our love and seeks to destroy it by separating us."

"Let you not upset yourself, O maiden, but let us pledge our fidelity to one another against my return." Cuchulain knew that he had been trapped.

But his pride had been hurt and he resolved to go through with the visit to Scotland. Besides, he had often heard of the prowess of Scatach and Donnal the Soldiery and he was not averse to being schooled a while by them.

Emer, however, found it hard to reconcile herself to his departure.

"You may never return," she sobbed. "My father says that if Donnal the Soldiery does not make an end of you, Scatach will; for both have harsh methods of imparting their knowledge."

"I swear by our love that I will return." Cuchulain's voice was confident.

Heartened somewhat by his fearlessness, Emer lifted her eyes to his. "I will be true to you, Cuchulain," she vowed, "even though the days of your absence be years."

"When I come again," said Cuchulain, "it will be to fulfill the conditions set for our marriage."

Emer smiled through her tears.

She was so beautiful at that moment that Cuchulain could not help himself; he gathered her into his strong, young arms and there beneath an azure sky they kissed as sweethearts for the first time.



## CHAPTER ELEVEN

### *Adventure in Scotland*

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CUCHULAIN did not go alone to Scotland. Fergus macRogh, Connal the Victorious and a warrior hitherto unknown to us, Loegaire Buadach, the Battle-Winner, went with him. This was because King Conchubar feared that something dire might happen to him. Could he have foreseen the hideous—we use the adjective advisedly—the hideous sorceress that would part Cuchulain from his companions before many days had passed, he would not have given his consent to the undertaking at all. But we anticipate.

It was daybreak when Cuchulain and his companions set sail. Other than themselves the only

thing stirring at that mystic hour was a flock of sea-gulls bickering and screaming on the gaunt, grey cliffs of the coast. Gallantly their little boat rode the white caps with Cuchulain at the rudder and the others tending sail. By the time the sun bestirred itself and rose gloriously golden over the rim of the horizon, they could see Scotland ahead clearer than Ireland behind.

And so in time they came to Alba, and it was in the forge where he made his weapons that they found Donnal the Soldiery.

More than anything else Cuchulain was impressed by his size. He stood seven feet if he stood an inch. A regular mountain of a man! And he wore a red beard down to his waist and had bushy eyebrows and icy, Scotch eyes that made Cuchulain think as he looked into them of a bottomless lake.

Having carefully considered the events which followed we are inclined to believe that Emer's father, King Forgall Manach the Wily, was in league with Donnal the Soldiery and had advised him to treat Cuchulain very harshly. We would even go so far as to say that he ordered him murdered. But we leave our reader to judge for himself.

In his forge Donnal the Soldiery had a bellows that was worked by jumping up and down on a flagstone over a small hole in the ground. So soon as Cuchulain had introduced himself and made

known his mission, Donnal the Soldiery ordered him to work this bellows. Cuchulain walked over to it.

"Take off your sandals," said Donnal the Soldiery roughly.

Suspecting nothing, but thinking rather that this was a peculiarity of the bellows, Cuchulain did so; he removed his sandals and leaped onto the stone.

You won't believe me when I tell you, but that stone was red hot.

Cuchulain did not cry out though. He thought Donnal the Soldiery was testing his courage. So he jumped up and down, up and down, up and down; the soles of his feet blistering and bursting as he rose and fell. In no time at all he had the forge fire roaring at a white heat and showers of sparks racing up the wide chimney. But Donnal the Soldiery did not tell him to stop. He was tempering a piece of steel for a sword, it seems, and the fire had to be kept hot all the time. A day and a night and all through the next day and the next night he kept Cuchulain working the bellows. Not until the morning of the third day did he allow him any respite. By that time Cuchulain's feet were livid and swollen beyond all recognition. Yet even then he did not utter one word of protest. What he did say was: "Have you the weapon finished?" That; just that and no more. A Spartan remark if ever there was one.

But Donnal the Soldiery was not through with

him yet by a long chalk. After a little while, he said, "Do you see yon spear?"

"I do," said Cuchulain. He could not help but see it. It was set in the ground, point to the sky.

"Go, leap on it," Donnal the Soldiery told him.

Cuchulain looked down at his mutilated feet. "Barefooted?" he asked.

"Barefooted," said the unrelenting Scotch warrior.

Cuchulain gritted his teeth. Then, running, he leaped and landed on the head of the sharply tipped spear.

"Spin yourself around," shouted Donnal the Soldiery.

Slowly Cuchulain began to turn. Slowly the spearhead ate its way into his feet.

"Faster! Faster!" cried Donnal the Soldiery.

Cuchulain increased his speed. 'Round and around he spun; a whirling dervish on a spearhead.

Musha, 'twas the high price he was paying to become a great warrior, the poor chap. But he had yet to complain. That is what we like about him. No whiner was he; he was taking his medicine like a man, like a hero. Where to find his equal today? The warriors of the twentieth century are cut with a different scissors. They would be rebelling if they did not get enough milk in their coffee.

Listen to this, you twentieth century warriors, Cuchulain stayed seven days and seven nights on

that spearpoint. Seven days and seven nights! His feet bleeding and festering! He did not rebel. He was a better man for it, he admitted afterwards. It taught him endurance.

When at the end of those seven days and seven nights, Donnal the Soldiery permitted him to come down, he said to him, "Go into the house now and my daughter, Dornolla Big-Fist will set food before you."

Dornolla Big-Fist! Our hideous sorceress!

Cuchulain had never seen such an ugly, such a revolting creature in all his living days.

Picture a tall, gaunt, malevolent-eyed woman with matted red hair, a black, warty face that she never washed, monstrous feet turned backwards, big, ungainly knees and hands the size of Irish hams. There you have Dornolla Big-Fist; hag and hideous sorceress skilled in all the soul-stifling rites of Black Magic.

Strange as it may seem, Dornolla Big-Fist did not think herself at all repellent; as a matter of fact she was wont to compare herself favorably with the bonniest of Scotland's bonny lassies. But we do not condemn her for that. What we have against her, among other things, is that she fell in love with Cuchulain at first sight and he was not five minutes in the house when, brazen as you please, she asked him to marry her.

Imagine! Imagine the like of it! Imagine Cuchulain having anything to do with such a person!

We must bear in mind, however, that Cuchulain was a gentleman along with everything else. He did not want to hurt her feelings any more than was absolutely necessary. He thanked her for the honor she did him and refused her gently.

Nevertheless his politeness paid him poor dividends. Dornolla Big-Fist turned on him in a blind fury, raving and ranting, tearing her coarse hair and stamping her feet turned backwards. She would be revenged on him, she screamed. She would consult with her demons. She would surround him with devils. She would drink his blood before she got through with him.

Naturally there was but one course left open to Cuchulain. He took it. Together with his companions he shook the dust of Donnal the Soldiery's house from his feet and set out for the abode of Scatach the woman warrior.

Dornolla Big-Fist watched them out of sight. Could they have seen the evil in her face they would, without a doubt in the world, have known that she was up to mischief and been on their guard. Alas, they dismissed her from their minds.

From such neglect is danger born.

How did Scotland impress Cuchulain? Did the beautiful plains on the mountaintops appeal to him? And what about the glens and lakes? And the rock tarns clear and deep on the summits of the ridges? And the purple and white heather?

Did it bloom any prettier than in Ireland? And the shallow lakes of the plains; what of them? And the beautiful valleys running northeast and southwest? And the river gorges? And the stark highlands?

Ah me, we wonder if we will be considered prejudiced for saying that Cuchulain scarcely paid any attention to bonny Scotland? We hope not.

Cuchulain was in love you see and bent on accomplishing his mission and returning home to win Emer. If he noticed the country at all it was in an abstract way. It lay between him and Scatach the woman warrior's. The lakes, the tarns, even the braes were but milestones along the way. He did not think of them once they were left behind.

Walking now along a hilly road, he was asking Fergus macRogh if he thought the rain which had been falling in sheets for the past two hours would ever let up. A little damply, Fergus ventured the opinion that it might clear up by evening if the northeast wind died down.

Putting the same question to a shepherd they met along the way, however, Cuchulain was surprised to learn that it was not raining at all.

"'Tis naught but a wee mist," the shepherd explained.

Wet to the skin, Cuchulain felt inclined to disagree with him. Afterwards, while hurrying down a steep incline, intent on crossing as rapidly as possible the bleak moor stretching out ahead, Cuchu-

lain suddenly pulled up short. His face was a study in surprise. His companions seemed equally affected. Each was asking himself could that which they saw be possible. Or was it a mirage? Bewildered, they turned and looked at one another.

"Do you see what I see?" queried Connal the Victorious.

"I see a familiar place," admitted Loegaire Buadach, the Battle-Winner.

"I do, too," said Fergus macRogh.

"I see Emain Macha," Cuchulain blurted out, bolder than the rest.

Such indeed was the case. There could be no doubt about it. There, right in the heart of Scotland, on a lonely moor was Emain Macha, perfect in every detail.

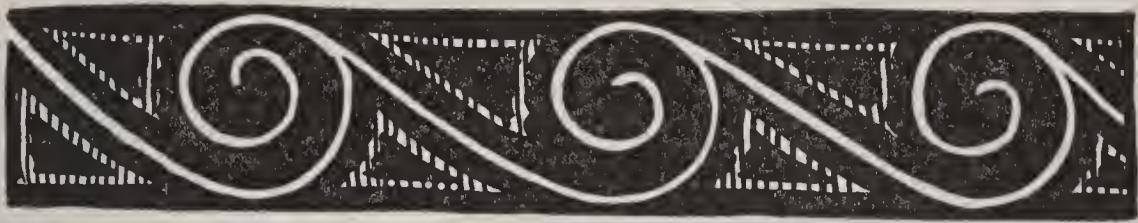
"I will go up to it," volunteered Cuchulain. "It may be a trap to ensnare us."

"You will do no such thing," Fergus macRogh started to say, but Cuchulain was gone before he had the words out of his mouth.

Cautiously, Cuchulain approached the strange phenomenon. Quite clearly he could discern the Royal House, the House of the Red Branch and the Speckled House. They seemed so real at first that he half expected to see the Boy-Corps hurling on the lawn and to hear King Conchubar cry out a greeting. Drawing closer, however, he noticed a sort of unreality, an eerie unreality about the group of buildings. It was as if they were built of shad-

ows. And they appeared to be moving. A moment before he could have sworn they were twenty yards nearer. Still he was lured on by the mystery of the thing. He wanted to get to the bottom of it. He no longer believed it the real Emain Macha. It did not occur to him that Dornolla Big-Fist might have something to do with it.

To his companions, intently watching, it appeared that he had already come up to the buildings and passed them by without paying them any attention. Sensing something unusual, they ran after him, calling him by name. To their horror they found that an invisible wall held them back. Realizing then that forces over which they had no control were at work against them, they endeavored in every known way to attract Cuchulain's attention. But he, pursuing the will-o-the-wisp mirage, neither saw nor heard them. When he did look back, they had completely disappeared from sight. Thoroughly alarmed, he shouted their names at the top of his voice. No one answered. A ghastly silence enveloped him. And then the mirage disappeared. And suddenly a demonic laugh rent the air. He raised his eyes aloft. Poised in mid-air and wreathed in smoke, the head of Dornolla Big-Fist leered down at him. Then it too disappeared, leaving him shaken, bewildered and forlorn.



## CHAPTER TWELVE

### *Monster of the Deep*

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ALONE then on the bleak and dismal moor, Cuchulain wandered haphazard, not knowing where he was nor caring. The loss of his companions weighed heavily on him. He would not have minded so much had he known they were safe. His agony lay in not knowing what their fate was. Then too he wondered about Dornolla Big-Fist. What would she do next? Were she but a warrior he would know how to deal with her. A sorceress was so difficult to combat. He was not versed in Black Magic nor had no wish to be. Oh well, he soliloquized, if the worst came to the worst he would die fighting. He was fated to die young anyway.

In this despondent frame of mind, he continued his aimless wandering. Towards evening he came to the shores of a large lake. Tired, he sat himself down to rest by the water's edge. Presently his attention was attracted by a commotion out in the middle of the lake. At first he thought he was witnessing the birth of a whirlpool, that ancient sucking terror dreaded and avoided by the mariner. The water eddied swiftly in circles. Gradually it

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assumed the appearance of a giant revolving wheel. Cuchulain observed, however, that where in a whirlpool the water is sucked down funnel-like in the center, here it appeared as if it were being pushed up from below by some terrific force. His lethargy dropped from him momentarily. He kept his eyes glued to the spot. The commotion increased. Waves formed, waves that overlapped and burst crashing on the shore. Then—oh, terrifying moment!—out of the depths and slowly into view rose a frightful monster. Python-like of neck, fierce-fanged of head, low, slimy and web-footed of body, it turned and stared straight at Cuchulain. You would honestly say that it had come up for no other purpose. What was Cuchulain's reaction? He was not frightened. Repelled better describes how he felt. He did not stir nor move away. He sat there watching. The monster of a sudden began to move towards him. The sough of the waves against its sides as it awkwardly ploughed its way through the water was clearly audible. It was the same monotonous sound that a wave makes when it hits the belly of a rowboat. What was he to do? Fight? He debated. No, he was too tired, too out of sorts to fight. Besides there was little to be gained by fighting in this instance. If the monster followed after and attacked him, however, he would defend himself as best he could. With this thought in mind, he rose to his feet and, stepping out, headed inland.

When the monster came out of the water, it stood for a moment, its web feet flat against the earth, and shook itself as a dog does. Then with great deliberation, it started out after Cuchulain. Have you ever seen a duck waddle across a farmyard? That was the way it walked for all the world, but much faster. Its stride measured nine yards, two feet, three and one half inches. Naturally Cuchulain heard it. But he did not turn around. He stuck to his decision. The first move would have to be the monster's. We reiterate that he was not afraid. Please bear in mind that Cuchulain knew not fear. He may have been startled at times. But that is not fear. Fear is when you tremble with fright and in your chest a searing flame burns icily, paralyzing you. Those symptoms never at any time visited Cuchulain. He knew them not. They were as foreign to him as light is to darkness.

Doggedly, the monster pursued him. But can we really call it pursuit now? A number of times already it has caught up with him and could have attacked him, but each time it dropped back of its own volition. What can be the meaning of these tactics? We can but wait and see.

There it goes again, lumbering forward, its python-like neck stretched forward, nostrils dilated, fangs bared, frenzied eyes rolling.

Cuchulain could feel its warm breath on the nape of his neck and felt that the time to give battle had arrived. Drawing his sword from its scabbard,

he turned in his steps. As a flea is to an elephant so was he to the brute beast. The odds against him were a million to one. He knew it. Sword poised, he lunged.

What followed was as unexpected as it was extraordinary.

The monster sidled to one side and Cuchulain, carried forward by the force of his thrust, tripped and fell. Had the monster chosen to strike at that moment he would have been killed dead. But—and this is what is so extraordinary—it made no move against him. It stood absolutely motionless. Cuchulain knew not what to make of it. Picking himself up, he stared at the monster, puzzled, bewildered. Its whole attitude seemed to have changed. No longer did it look fierce and repellent. It actually looked friendly. It would look at him and present its side to him as if it were trying to tell him something. It dawned on him that it wanted him to get on its back. But was this another trick of Dornolla Big-Fist's? It might very well be. While he pondered the question, the monster came closer. Really, it was not such an ugly poor brute after all. Why should he not take a chance and mount it? Anything was better than wandering the moor. He had nothing to lose; everything to gain.

“By Ruaire, I’ll do it!” he voiced aloud.

And with one bound, he was astride the monster.



## CHAPTER THIRTEEN

### *Emer Beset*

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OF the wild ride that followed what can we say? It was at once a thrilling adventure and a horrible nightmare. You would never have thought such a cumbersome beast could move so swiftly; it literally flew over the ground fiercely eating up the miles with savage relish.

Watchful and wakeful at first, happily a drowsiness crept over Cuchulain and he slept where he sat astride the monster's back. He slept not for hours but for days. He might have been drugged so deeply did he sleep. And all the while his strange mount forged rapidly ahead, pausing neither to

eat nor drink nor did it stop to rest at any time.

On the fourth day Cuchulain awoke.

Where was he? To what unknown, to what fearsome destination had the monster transported him?

Bewilderedly he looked about. His surroundings were quite foreign to him. That he was on an island was obvious. He could hear the sough of the sea on all sides. The monster had come to a standstill beside a rock-tarn. As tarns go it was fairly big; almost as big as a lake. Then with a joyous start he saw two boys out rowing.

“Where am I? What place is this?” he shouted.

But even as he spoke the monster with a sudden twist threw him to the ground and bolted away.

By the time he picked himself up the boys had disappeared. No doubt they thought the monster was going to attack them. But the monster had gone in the opposite direction. He could see it lumbering swiftly southward towards the sea.

“Och, I am no better off now than I was before,” he mourned, “for I am still alone and I know not where.”

Then he made up his mind to walk inland a bit. It occurred to him that there must be houses in the vicinity, else where had the boys come from?

He had reasoned correctly. There were houses thereabouts; one in particular, a pleasant looking abode with a fuchsia bush in bloom by the door. A

maiden and her brother lived there and it was there that he knocked and asked for food and drink.

When he had finished eating, he inquired of the maiden and her brother if they knew where Scatach, the woman-warrior, lived.

"You are near it and you are not near it," replied the young man enigmatically.

Cuchulain asked him to explain himself more clearly.

"The Plain of Ill-Luck lies before you," revealed he.

An ominous sounding name Cuchulain thought.

"Yes, the Plain of Ill-Luck lies before you," solemnly repeated the young man and because he had taken an instant liking to Cuchulain he decided to help him. "On this side of the plain," he said, "men stick fast, while on the far side the grass rises high and strong even as a spearhead and impales them. It is what you must do you must take this wheel and this apple. Roll the wheel across this side of the plain and follow in its track. Roll the apple across the other side doing likewise and you will accomplish the journey without hurt or hindrance."

Cuchulain took the wheel and the apple from him. "I shall not forget your kindness," he thanked him. "But tell me is it on the far side of the plain Scatach lives?"

"No. No, it is not. When you have crossed the

plain there is a glen you must pass through and at the foot of the glen a mountain you must climb. More than that I cannot tell you."

Cuchulain thanked him again. Then he said good-by and went his way.

Across the Plain of Ill-Luck he followed the track of the wheel and the apple. It took him five days but he did it. Then through the glen and over the mountain he wended his way. That took another five days but he did it. At the foot of the mountain he ran into a group of Scatach's pupils.

"Where is Scatach?" he asked.

They pointed to a nearby island.

"How do I get there?" said Cuchulain.

"There is only one way. You must cross the Bridge of the Cliff." And they showed him where it was.

Alas!—and alas! the Bridge of the Cliff was not an ordinary bridge. It was bewitched. The moment he stepped on it at one end the other end lifted up and threw him flat on his face.

Scatach's pupils roared with laughter.

Cuchulain tried again but with the same result.

Between guffaws the pupils made nasty remarks.

Infuriated, Cuchulain tried once more. Running, he jumped, landed in the middle, jumped again before the far end had time to rise and got across safely. Looking back, it did him good to see the chagrined expression on the faces of the pupils.

Scatach's stronghold was but a few paces dis-

tant. He knocked on the door with his spear. Knocked, did we say? He drove the spear clean through it.

And Scatach inside was heard to murmur, "Here comes one that has little need of my teaching." And she bade her daughter, Uatach, go see who it was.

Seeing so handsome a youth without, Uatach dallied conversing and . . . and—we may as well out with the terrible accusation—flirting.

At last Cuchulain lost patience with her. "Take me to Scatach," he pleaded.

"There she goes now!" Uatach cried, for Scatach had gone out by another door and was on her way down to the great yew tree on the lawn to teach her two sons, Cuar and Cett.

Cuchulain determined to follow her.

"Let me first give you an advice." Uatach caressed his arm, detaining him. "When you come up to my mother set your sword against her and make her promise to teach you without neglect, to foretell your future and to let us be friends."

And do you know that is what Cuchulain did. He pinned Scatach to the trunk of the yew tree. And Scatach screamed at him to name his wishes. And Cuchulain told her that she must promise to teach him without neglect, foretell his future and let him be friends with her daughter. And Scatach, frightened, promised. Then Cuchulain put up his sword and Scatach gave him his first lesson and that was

to run up a lance and balance himself on the point; a great feat entirely.

In the meantime what was happening back in Ireland?

Oh, a number of things. Things are forever happening in Ireland.

For instance?

For instance, Lugaid son of Ros, son of Alamac, King of Munster, was on his way to woo one of King Cairbre Niafer's twelve beautiful daughters.

Yes, I know that sounds as if it had nothing at all to do with our story but remember the old Irish saying, "Step by step up the bohereen and through the mud we come to the farm."

You see, it happened that every one of Cairbre Niafer's daughters was already betrothed and Emer's father, King Forgall Manach the Wily, knew that. So he too was on his way to Cairbre Niafer's to intercept King Lugaid and extol Emer's charms.

They met face to face in Cairbre Niafer's reception hall. King Lugaid had just gleaned the sorrowful tidings that Cairbre's daughters were pledged already and he looked very down in the mouth, I may tell you. The thought of going back alone to his great barrack of a palace was preying on his mind.

"Why do you sorrow, O King?" Forgall Manach the Wily, began soothingly. "In my house is a

maiden fairer than you have ever seen; Emer, the darling of my heart! The loveliest maid in Erin."

"Do you tell me so?" King Lugaid brightened up perceptibly.

"Come and see for yourself."

King Lugaid needed no second bidding.

But when they came to Luglochta Loga, Emer was nowhere to be seen. For an awful moment King Forgall Manach the Wily thought Cuchulain had returned in his absence and carried her off. It was with a sigh of relief therefore that he found her sobbing as if her heart would break in one of the turret chambers.

"Emer!" he bellowed. "Stop that nonsense! Dress yourself in your finest attire, wear all your jewels and have your sisters bring you to the Great Hall."

Poor Emer! Pity her. She knew what was planned for her: a loveless marriage that would involve the exchange of gold and livestock; in other words an auction, a sale. Distracted, she looked out the window, hoping for a miracle, hoping to see Cuchulain approach. The hills in the distance seemed to shrink with pity for her. They too looked down on an empty plain. Clutching the curtain, she wept. And then—O, terrible moment! —she calculated the distance from her window to the ground. Trembling, she drew back. Surely there was some other way than that? She knelt and kneeling prayed the gods to help her. And

when she had prayed her anguished heart was calmed and in the quiet moments that followed it was given to her to know what she must do. And she went to her fate as a great lady should.

Entering the Great Hall with her sisters, her step was firm, her head held high. A saffron silken dress fell in marble folds to her feet. Draped about her slender shoulders was a green-hued scarf and, despite her father's instructions, the only jewelry she wore was an emerald hung from a golden chain encircling her milk-white neck.

King Lugaid rose to his feet. He was glad now that Cairbre Niafer's daughters were all promised. Not even the loveliest of them—and she was very lovely—could compare with Emer.

As Emer progressed the length of the hall she was joined by her father who took her by the hand and as they came to the foot of the dais whereon stood King Lugaid, he bowed ceremoniously and spoke the words of introduction.

So entranced was King Lugaid that he dispensed with all formality and immediately invited Emer to be seated by his side.

Emer paled. If she were to save herself for Cuchulain she must act at once. King Lugaid's invitation amounted to a proposal of marriage. For such was the custom of the land. Were she to once sit by his side she would be his betrothed. Bravely she looked into his eyes.

“You do me great honor, O King,” she said

humblly. "But surely my father has not neglected to tell you that I am already betrothed?"

King Forgall Manach the Wily's eyes blazed. His daughter was defying him. And before his very eyes. Unheard of thing. "You are not betrothed, Emer," he interjected furiously.

Emer did not so much as glance in his direction. "King Lugaid," she said, "I am betrothed to Cuchulain, nephew of Conchubar, King of Ulster."

King Lugaid was startled. To marry Emer then would be to incur the enmity of Cuchulain. It might even mean war with Ulster. Both prospects appalled him. But on the other hand was not Emer worth, even for a brief time, any catastrophe that might follow?

"Pay no attention to what she says, O King," King Forgall Manach the Wily rudely interrupted his train of thought. "'Tis but a childish attachment she has for Cuchulain. Besides Cuchulain is out of the country in . . . in Scotland. He may never return."

King Lugaid remained silent save for a noncommittal, "Hum." He was waiting to hear what Emer would say.

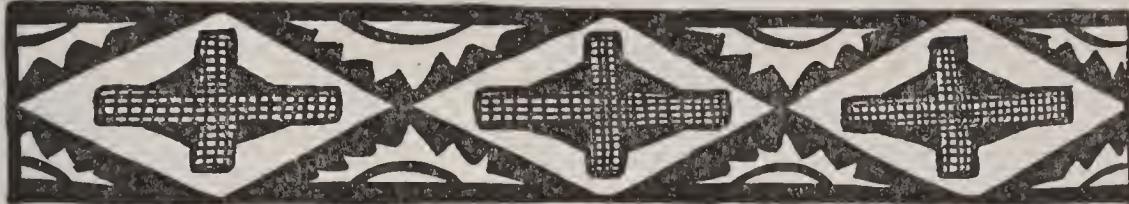
"I have vowed fidelity to Cuchulain," said Emer. "I will not break my vow; no, even if he does not come back I will not break it."

She accompanied her words with such a fine air of determination that King Lugaid lost all hope. He recognized in her the type of maiden who would

remain steadfast to her vow even though Death be the penalty. Nevertheless he did not let this prevent him from venting his anger on her father.

"You are a cruel parent, King Forgall Manach the Wily," he roared. "You should . . ."

Emer did not hear the rest of his tirade. Triumphant, she had left the hall.



## CHAPTER FOURTEEN

### *Cuchulain's Chapter*

---

WHO can tell us better than Cuchulain himself what happened while he was with Scatach, the woman-warrior? Hist! Shush! Let him speak.

“The days I spend with Scatach were the happy days; they were so. She taught me many difficult feats that I did not know before. It was from Scatach that I learned the throw of the staff, the rope feat, the blade feat, the whirl of a brave chariot chief; she even showed me how to cast the hand-stone of the warrior, the most difficult of all feats. Indeed, I was deeply indebted to her and I took an oath that if there ever came a time when I could repay her, I would do so gladly. That that time would come, I did not doubt, but it came sooner than I expected and to make matters worse Scatach did not want me to do what I did. Even so I did it and afterwards she was beholden to me.

“This is what happened. Scatach declared war on Princess Aife. Princess Aife ruled the neighboring province. She was Scatach’s rival and, by the same token, her worst enemy. One day while I

was thereabouts, she took it into her head to people part of Scatach's territory with a sprinkling of her tribes. You never saw anything like the way Scatach carried on when she found it out. She almost had convulsions. In a loud voice she summoned her armies. The next thing I knew, the war was on.

"To me, to be sure, the war meant an opportunity to display my newly acquired learning nor was I unmindful that it would give me the fine opportunity to pay Scatach back for all she had done for me. You can imagine my feelings when she refused my services. Egged on by Uatach, her daughter, who thought herself in love with me, she told me that she did not care to have me risk my life. Me, mind you! A warrior! 'Twas a fine how do you do, wasn't it? But you have not heard the half of it. In order to make sure that I would not gainsay her, she put a sleeping powder in my drink and bound me with chains while I slept.

"It was a potent draught she gave me. 'Twas supposed to keep me asleep for twenty-four hours. But sure I woke up at the end of an hour and the chains that bound me I broke with a deep breath and I rose up and went out onto the battlefield.

"Meeting up with Scatach's sons, Cuar and Cett, I asked how the battle was going.

"'Not well at all,' they reported gloomily. 'Princess Aife has three champion warriors, the sons of Ilsuanach, that are cutting a swathe in our army.'

"'Where are they?' said I.

"'Over there.'

"I looked over and sure enough I saw three powerful men, fullgrown and bearded. Wielding their swords expertly, it was true they were creating the terrible havoc. Scatach's army was falling right and left. Something had to be done, I decided, and at once. Telling Cuar and Cett to keep back the rest of Princess Aife's army, I bore down on the sons of Ilsuanach. The clash as we came together echoed in the caves of the distant seashore. The onlookers said they were blinded by the red sparkling of our swords. But I would not know about that. My battle-fury was raging inside me and I was fighting better than I ever fought before. When it was all over, the sons of Ilsuanach lay dead and I was alive, praise the gods that watched over me and kept me from harm!"

"Scatach, I don't have to tell you, was jubilant, so jubilant in fact she forgot to censor me for going against her wishes. Princess Aife, on the other hand, was downcast. Faced with the loss of her champions she was in a fine pickle and no mistake. So what did she do but withdraw, herself and her armies, from the battlefield for the rest of the day.

"Venturing forth on the morrow, however, Scatach found to her dismay that Princess Aife had found three new champions to espouse her cause.

"'Woe! Woe is me!' she wailed. 'Aife has enlisted the sons of Ess Enchen who are unconquer-

able. My own two boys will never stand up against them. What am I to do at all at all?’

“‘Let you not fret yourself so,’ advised I. ‘I will go against them along with Cuar and Cett.’

“I won’t tell you what she said by way of reply, for ’twas full of nonsense about what a great hero I was.

“And so at mid-day when the sun was riding high in the heavens, Cuar and Cett and myself sallied forth. Like ducks among hens the sons of Ess Enchen stood out from the rest of Princess Aife’s army. We roared out our challenge. The sons of Ess Enchen stepped forth from the ranks and came towards us. Heavily confident was their step; it raised little dust clouds as they trod the plain. I drew sword against one of them, Cuar and Cett tackled the other two. Both armies stopped in their fighting to watch us. Princess Aife in her chariot looked scornful of us. She was certain of victory. Poor Scatach was ill at ease. But let you not think badly of her for that. Her sons were fighting. As we crossed swords a mighty cheer arose on both sides. If cheering could have decided the issue, it would have been a draw. I pitched into my man as best I could. Cuar and Cett did likewise. Princess Aife and Scatach began to scream advices that were lost on the wind. Of a sudden, Princess Aife covered her eyes with shaking hands. My sword had found its mark. Like a pricked balloon, my opponent crumpled up, sagged and fell.





Remembering at that moment all I owed Scatach, I wiped off my sword and going over to Cuar told him to retire. I would take his place, I said and did. Out of the corner of my eye and I hard at it, I could see that Cett was hard pressed. So risking everything, leaving myself wide open—a thing I seldom am guilty of—I lunged. Luck was with me that day if ever it was. The second son of Ess Enchen tried to retreat, stumbled and fell forward, impaling himself. Princess Aife let out a shriek of anguish. But I paid no attention to that, I can tell you. Instead, I dashed over to Cett. In all truth he was in a bad way.

“‘Back with you,’ I yelled in his ear. ‘Two against one is not fair.’

“And that, my friends, was the beginning of the end. Sharp and short, clean and fair was that last duel. The third son of Ess Enchen fought valiantly—peace to his bones! But I was a match for him. He said as much and he falling; my sword buried to the hilt in his heart.

“Lord, the fuss Scatach made over me that night was a caution! And Uattach told me she was more in love with me than ever and she entwined her arms about my neck. But I was thinking all the while of Emer and wondering how long it would be before I would feel her arms about my neck.

“And then, of a sudden a messenger came into the banqueting hall, and whispered something in Scatach’s ear. It must be bad tidings, thought I,

for I could see that she was pale and trembling.

"Bad tidings was the word. Princess Aife had challenged her to single combat. She was terribly afraid. Although she had never admitted it to a living soul before, she broke down and confessed to me that Aife was the one woman in the world she feared.

"I would not be a warrior had I not offered to help her. 'Princess Aife must first engage me in combat,' I said. ' 'Twas I that slew her champions.'

"Throwing her arms about me, Scatach kissed me in front of everybody. I was that mad. . . . But never mind that now. 'Tis of the past.

"Before setting out the next morning, I drew Scatach to one side. 'Tell me,' I asked her, 'what does Princess Aife love above all else?'

"This I wanted to know because in my sleeping I had a dream in which I heard a voice say, 'Find out what Aife loves and you will be victorious.'

"'That,' replied Scatach, answering my question, 'is easily told. Aife loves her charioteer, her chariot and her two horses.'

"Coming to the place of combat, shortly afterwards, I let out a great cry, summoning Princess Aife. Before I could see where she came from she was on me. With one blow she shattered my sword, severing the blade from the hilt. Never in all my days had I been so near death. And to 'think it should have been at the hands of a woman! Ah

me! Princess Aife gloated over me, torturing me by delaying the fatal stroke.

“‘You should have fought for Aife,’ she jeered at me. ‘You are almost too handsome to kill.’

“I turned my head away. Then I remembered my dream. ‘Woe! Woe! is Princess Aife,’ I wailed. ‘Her charioteer, her chariot and her two horses that she loves above all else have fallen in yonder glen.’

“My voice must have sounded convincing enough. Princess Aife straightened up, panic-stricken and looked towards the glen. Seizing my opportunity, I sprang to my feet, wrested her sword from her hand, caught her around the waist and, tossing her over my left shoulder, made off with her to Scatach’s stronghold.

“When I brought her in, Scatach was beside herself with joy. At long last, her hated rival was in her hands.

“‘Aife shall die tonight,’ she exulted. ‘On a bed of red coals she shall die.’

“I was horrified. ‘Scatach,’ I said sternly, ‘you are going to let Princess Aife go free.’

“‘Go free?’ Scatach looked at me as if I were gone suddenly mad.

“‘On conditions,’ I added.

“‘Conditions?’

“‘She will give you hostages and her word never again to invade your territory nor bother you in any way.’

"Princess Aife tried to say something but burst into tears instead.

"Even Scatach's heart was touched. 'Do you accept the conditions, Aife?' she asked.

"Princess Aife nodded her affirmative.

"'And now, Scatach,' said I, 'you must be foretelling for me my future. It is the only one of my three wishes left unfulfilled.'

"'You are going to leave us?' She guessed what I had in mind.

"'Tis time I was going.'

"Scatach's eyes took on a distant, a seer's look. Haltingly, she commenced. 'Cuchulain, great dangers lie before you . . . At the Cattle Raid of Cooley you will be welcomed . . . The warriors of Maeve will come against you . . . Single handed you will repulse them . . . Thirty years I reckon the span of your life . . . You will die a noble death . . .'

"She stopped and as one awakening from a dream looked about. Seeing Princess Aife was still with us, she said, 'Leave us now, Aife. Leave us to say farewell.'

"'Twas the fond farewell, the touching farewell."



## CHAPTER FIFTEEN

### *Cuchulain and Devorgil*

---

AND Cuchulain left the abode of Scatach, the woman-warrior, nor did he tarry nor meet with a single adventure until he came to the island of Rechrain off the coast of Ireland. He landed there on *Samain* night.

A word here about *Samain* before we continue. *Samain* corresponds to the November Eve of modern times. The Irish used to begin their year with this feast. You see they believed themselves descended from the God of Death and in his honor counted their time by nights instead of days. In view of this it is easy for us to understand why

they began their year on *Samain*. By that time summer—the day of the year—had waned and winter—the night—was setting in.

Now, Cuchulain had a purpose in landing on Rechrain on that particular night. Ordinarily he would not have bothered to stop there. But he knew that King Conchubar exacted tribute from the island and that it was paid on *Samain* night. Moreover, it was the duty of Connal the Victorious and Loegaire Buadach, the Battle-Winner, to collect the tribute. Not having seen nor heard anything of his two friends since their mysterious disappearance in Scotland, he was naturally anxious to know how they fared.

Visualize him now, climbing a narrow path winding upward from the sea to the palace of Ruad, King of Rechrain. His heart beats lightly, not a dark thought disturbs the serenity of his mind. A vision of Emer rises up before him and he quickens his step as if it were to her he was hurrying. Overhead, the night sky is a deep blue and wispy grey clouds drift wraith-like across the pale face of the moon. Suddenly, a star tumbles from its lofty perch and falls down . . . down . . . fastly down and is lost to sight behind a mountain ridge. Cuchulain was inclined to accept this as a good omen. He interpreted it as meaning that men in high places would fall before his might.

But who would have thought that on such a night in such a place a tragedy was being enacted?

Had anybody told him so, Cuchulain would have laughed at the idea.

Entering the palace at last, he was welcomed rather coldly he thought by King Ruad. The man seemed preoccupied and a dismal air as of mourning pervaded the palace. He inquired at once for his friends. Praise the gods! They were there. King Ruad took him to them in the drinking hall.

At first Connal and Loegaire thought him a ghost and shrunk back, afraid. But he soon convinced them that he was flesh and blood and he plied them with questions. What had happened to them in Scotland? Where did they disappear to? When had they arrived back in Ireland? And how?

Connal started to tell him and he was listening intently when a despairing wail rent the night air.

If you have ever heard the west wind moan fitfully in a sassafrass grove you know how the wail sounded to Cuchulain.

“What was that?” he cried, starting up.

If Connal and Loegaire knew they did not answer, but fidgeted and glanced uneasily, or was it compassionately? at King Ruad.

“What is it? Is there Death in the house?” Cuchulain was driven to ask.

“Worse than that,” King Ruad spoke gravely. “Worse than that. The wailing you heard is my daughter, Devorgil, whom this night I must yield up to the Formorians.”

"Where is Devorgil now?" demanded Cuchulain, his chivalrous instinct at once aroused.

"Below on the strand."

Cuchulain said not another word but turned on his heel and quit the palace.

On the strand he dimly saw the maiden in the dark and she crying her eyes out.

"Where do the Formorians hail from?" he asked softly.

"The land over yonder." Devorgil pointed towards the west.

"I will stay with you till they come," Cuchulain offered.

"Oh, let you not do that. They are savages; savages I tell you." She wrung her hands. "A life to them is nothing."

"I will stay with you all the same,"—calmly and he did not address the maiden again but respected her anguish and was silent.

Presently a boat appeared over the thin line of the horizon. Manned by three strong warriors in armor, it leaped through the water, pushing aside the waves as if they were ripples stirred up by a pebble. Within half an hour it grounded and the warriors leaped out and waded ashore.

Devorgil laid a restraining hand to Cuchulain's arm. "Go, go before it is too late," she begged.

But Cuchulain stood his ground.

"Hoho! hoho! what have we here?" chuckled the leader of the Formorians, discerning Cuchu-

lain's outline in the dark and thinking him some young lad, some sweetheart of Devorgil's maybe, come to make a showing of his courage.

Cuchulain remained silent. Devorgil sensed that he was drawing his sword from its scabbard.

"Who are you?" the Formorians now called harshly, not liking his silence and beginning with that prescience peculiar to warriors to feel themselves endangered.

Still Cuchulian did not reply.

The Formorians advanced cautiously.

When they were almost up to him, "This maiden goes from here only over my dead body," Cuchulain said menacingly.

His ultimatum must have puzzled the Formorians. They drew back, conversing in low whispers. Never before had they encountered any resistance on the island of Rechrain.

Quick to take advantage of their bafflement, Cuchulain leaped into action. Like a shot from a sling he landed in their midst, lashing out right and left with his keen blade.

Taken completely by surprise, the Formorians put up a poor defense. True, one of them did manage to wound him in the arm. But he repaid that wound with Death to all three.

His arm dripping blood, he turned to Devorgil. "Go back now and without fear to your father," he told her.

But instead Devorgil came close to him, knowing

him wounded. "First you must let me dress your wound. 'Tis dripping blood on the sand. I can hear it," she said and without waiting for his consent she tore a strip from her dress, making a bandage of it which she applied skillfully.

Cuchulain suffered her to minister to him in silence.

So soon as she arrived back at the palace, Devorgil related to her father that which had taken place. Of course, he asked at once for the name of her benefactor that he might thank him. Alas, Devorgil did not know who he was. She had never met Cuchulain and in the dark she was unable to see his face. This, we are sorry to say, led several young gallants in the room to claim that they had saved her. Devorgil, however, did not believe any of them.

Meanwhile Cuchulain had arrived and although he too heard the vauntings of the pretenders he said not a word. But Devorgil was determined to find out the truth or, as she herself put it, die in the attempt. Drawing her father to one side, "Oh Father," she whispered, "invite our guests to bathe and look for him that wears a bandage matching my dress on his right arm, for he it is that overcame the Formorians; he and he alone."

King Ruad showed himself only too willing to humor her. The guests, one and all, entered the baths and Cuchulain stood revealed.

"How now to suitably reward him?" pondered

King Ruad. Ah! since he had saved Devorgil, Devorgil should be his. He himself would pay her wedding dowry.

We ask you, was not this an embarrassing situation for Cuchulain?

On being apprised of it he did not know what to say nor do. Were he to refuse Devorgil she would be humiliated even unto death. Besides King Ruad would be mortally offended.

He was indeed in a deep quandary.

Even if he confessed to being betrothed already to Emer, it would not help. King Ruad would expect him to renounce Emer.

There was only one way out. He must play for time; time that mighty healer of all ills.

“O King,” he said, “if it pleases Devorgil let her follow me to Ireland at the end of a year.”

“She will follow you,” promised King Ruad.

Cuchulain sighed. This was what came of rescuing maidens in distress. Oh well, events would have to take their natural course. Before him now lay the difficult task of winning Emer, of fulfilling her conditions.

Thus musing, he went in search of Connal and Loegaire to see were they ready to leave.



## CHAPTER SIXTEEN

### *The Winning of Emer*

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WHEN Cuchulain arrived home at last, King Conchubar, everybody, was delighted to see him. For many days afterwards he was made much of. Feasts, games and dances were given in his honor and the men of Ulster never tired of hearing from his lips the tale of his adventures. Nevertheless he did not plan to remain long at Emain Macha. So soon as the clamor attendant upon his return began to die down, he ordered his chariot yoked and off with him to Luglochta Loga.

If he expected to fulfill Emer's conditions all in a day, however, he was doomed to disappointment. Try as he might—and he did try awfully hard, you may be sure—he could not penetrate past the twenty champions assigned by King Forgall Manach the Wily to watch over and guard his beloved. For a whole year he remained in the vicinity without once shutting an eye in sleep, but all to no avail. No, that is wrong. It did avail him something. Unwittingly, he had fulfilled one of the conditions, that of going sleepless from the end of

summer to the beginning of spring and from the beginning of spring till May-day and from then until the beginning of winter.

At the end of that time, he decided to return to Emain Macha. Had he given up hope? Certainly not. Surely, you have not forgotten that the time had come when Devorgil was to follow him to Ireland? He could not very well receive her encamped, as it were, on the very doorstep of his betrothed.

So one day, shortly after his return, he sent for O'Loeg, his charioteer. "O'Loeg," said he, "today is the day I look for Devorgil to arrive."

"Where are you to meet her?" asked O'Loeg.

"That I do not know," Cuchulian replied. "But let us set out for the coast. It may be that we will meet up with her along the way."

Away they went, the two of them and when they came to the shores of Lough Cuan, O'Loeg drew Cuchulain's attention to two strange birds flying overhead. Pulling out his sling, Cuchulain placed a stone in it and let fly. The birds came tumbling down. Aye, he had a great shot, Cuchulain had. O'Loeg hopped out of the chariot to pick them up.

"By the mother that gave me birth, is it seeing things I am?" he ejaculated.

"If you are, I am seeing them along with you," said Cuchulain.

What they saw was the two birds slowly chang-

ing into beautiful maidens one of whom was Devorgil, the other her handmaiden.

When the change was complete, Devorgil said, "It is the evil deed you have done, Cuchulain. I came as I promised and now you have wounded me with your sling."

'Deed 'twas true for her. Her arm was bleeding profusely.

Striving to make amends, Cuchulain pressed his lips to the wound and sucked out the stone that had lodged there.

A chivalrous gesture? Yes. But one with far reaching consequences. Once having tasted of Devorgil's blood he could not marry her. It would have been against the law. Devorgil herself realized this, but too late. Pale and trembling, she drew back. Alone in a strange country, a maiden and friendless, what was she to do? Return home? That would be impossible. She would be the laughing stock of the island.

While Devorgil thus worried, Cūchulain was trying to think of some way out of the situation. It would be deceitful to pretend that he regretted the turn of events. But he knew just as Devorgil knew that she could not go back unwed to Rechrain. Luckily, he noticed in time that O'Loeg was impressed by Devorgil. There was a look in his eyes amounting almost to veneration. "I will tell you what I will do if it is agreeable to you, Devorgil," he said. "I will give you my charioteer since I myself cannot marry you."

Shyly, Devorgil's eyes traveled over O'Loeg. O'Loeg held his breath. He could hardly bear the suspense. Then Devorgil blushed prettily. "Your charioteer is pleasing to me, Cuchulain," she confessed.

With a whoop of joy, O'Loeg enfolded her in his strong arms. While we are on the subject, we may as well add that they were happy every day after that till they died.

But now we must return again with Cuchulain to Luglochta Loga. This time he was determined to succeed. He had waited long enough. He began to feel that he could not go on living without Emer by his side. If necessary he was prepared to cut his way through to her and with that purpose in mind, he had traveled in his scythe-chariot; the one with bladed wheels.

Coming to the rath in front of the palace, he cleared its three ramparts in one leap; the hero's salmon leap, 'twas called. He was then inside the stronghold. Emer's twenty champions were gathered there and they with drawn swords, waiting for him. Recklessly and with all the tempestuous fire of his battle-fury, he waded into them. Hearing the commotion, King Forgall Manach the Wily, came rushing out to join the fray. Twenty-one against one! Think of it! Three blows of his sword did Cuchulain strike. Seven fell from the first, seven from the second and six from the third. Only King Forgall Manach the Wily was left alive. Perhaps Cuchulain did not wish to kill him. But sure he

brought about his own end, for in fleeing, he leaped and fell lifeless from one of the rath ramparts. With a clear field before him, Cuchulain boldly entered the palace. When he came out Emer was with him and her sister Fiall together with their weight in gold and silver.

Wait! Do not hold him triumphant yet. To fulfill Emer's conditions to the letter, he had yet to slay an hundred warriors from the Ford to Scenn Menn to the Ford of Banchuing Arcait.

On emerging from the rath, he heard the angry cries and shouts of Forgall Manach the Wily's subjects and loyal supporters. Hurriedly mounting his chariot, he shouted to O'Loeg to make all speed with the horses. Emer and Fiall, he placed, sitting at his feet the way they would be out of harm's way. Chieftains, nobles, druids, landowners, peasants and even slaves tried to block their way. But the chariot swiftly racing mowed them down with its wheel blades. At the Ford of Scenn Menn, Scenn Menn herself came against them. Cuchulain was forced to kill her to get by. At Glondath, he routed a small army and Emer sang his praises.

"It shall be called Glond-ath (Ford of the Deeds) hereafter," said Cuchulain.

After that they came to Rae-ban (White Field) where Cuchulain laid low the angry hosts of that place in consequence of which its name was changed to Crufoit (Blood Turf).

At Ath n-Imfuait on the Boyne they were over-

taken by a band of pursuers. Emer and Fiall left the chariot while Cuchulain gave them battle. In less time than it takes to tell they were the pursued, he the pursuer. Northward he pursued them and clods flew so furiously from the hoofs of the horses that the Ford of the Two Clods is the name on the place ever since.

And so it went all the way from the Ford of Scenn Menn to the Ford of Banchuing Arcait. An hundred men in all did he kill. Verily, Death sprung up in his wake. But he had fulfilled Emer's conditions and when they came to Emain Macha he married her without further delay and great entirely was their happiness. Ever afterwards, did you say? Well, that remains to be seen.



PART THREE  
THE CHAMPION'S PORTION





## CHAPTER SEVENTEEN

### *Bricriu's Feast*

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FOR over a year Bricriu of the Bitter-Tongue had been building at Dun-Rudraige a palace wherein to feast King Conchubar and the warriors of Ulster. Finished now, it resembled in design the House of the Red Branch at Emain Macha, but surpassed that building both in workmanship and the splendor of its appointments. It took a wagon team to haul each beam and seven men to set each pole in place. The frontings were of bronze overlaid with gold to a height of thirty feet. Particularly noticeable was the couch intended for King Conchubar. Set high above all others in the banqueting hall it sparkled and glowed with carbuncles and other

rare gems. Worthy of special attention too was the balcony Bricriu had constructed for his own use. Overlooking the banqueting hall, it was richly decorated and studded with glass windows so that he could see everything that went on below.

When all was in readiness, Bricriu himself went to Emain Macha to deliver his invitation.

"O King," said he, "I have prepared a feast worthy of you in my new palace."

King Conchubar was not visibly impressed. "We have heard much of your new palace, Bricriu," he said carelessly. "As to the feast, let us hear what the warriors of Ulster have to say."

"We will not go," they cried in one mighty voice. "Bricriu would stir up strife amongst us. We know him of old."

Unabashed, Bricriu pursed his lips in a particularly nasty manner. "You will fare worse if you do not come," he threatened.

"How so?" King Conchubar was fast losing patience.

"I will set father against son and mother against daughter till not one be left alive in all Ulster."

"Maybe we had better humor him?" suggested Fergus macRogh.

"Take council first," interjected Sencha son of Ailill, the learned man.

"Else there is bound to be mischief," King Conchubar concurred.

And so they met in conference and Sencha spoke

to them in this wise, "Demand hostages of Bricriu and when the feast is set surround him with eight swordsmen and force him to leave the banqueting hall."

These conditions on being apprised of them, Bricriu accepted seemingly in good faith.

It is not without knowing our man that we say *seemingly*. No sooner had the warriors disbanded than he went up to Loegaire Buadach, the Battle-Winner.

"Hail, mighty warrior," he greeted him. "So great your deeds, so widespread your renown, you are entitled to the Championship of Ulster."

"I can have it any time I want it."

But despite the offhand manner in which he spoke Loegaire was flattered.

"If you do as I say the Championship of Erin will be yours," tempted Bricriu.

"What would you have me do?"

"You must win the Champion's Portion at the feast."

At every feast in those days a special portion was set aside for the champion warrior. It was to this that Bricriu referred.

"What is the Portion?" Loegaire inquired.

"'Tis a cauldron of wine. 'Tis a young bullock. 'Tis a seven-year-old champion boar and 'tis a hundred wheaten-honey cakes."

"And what must I do to win it?"

"At the end of the day when the feast is set, let

you have your charioteer rise up and lay claim to it for you."

"Is that all?"

"'Tis as easy as all that."

"Then I'm your man. The Champion's Portion will fall to me else there will be widows in Ulster."

Having thus incited Loegaire, Bricriu went next to Connal the Victorious and after that to Cuchulain and incited them in like manner. Certain then that there would be strife when all three rose up to claim the Champion's Portion, he returned to Dun-Rudraige.

On the appointed day when the feast was set the eight swordsmen led Bricriu from the banqueting hall as prescribed. He paused on the threshold. "Let you not forget to set the Champion's Portion before him you consider the greatest warrior among you," he called out.

Whereupon Sedlang macRiangabra, Loegaire's charioteer, rose up in his standing. "Set the Champion's Portion before my master here," he told the attendants.

"Do no such a-thing," protested Id macRiangabra, Connal's charioteer. "Set it before my master."

"Pay no attention to either of them," cried O'Loeg, Cuchulain's charioteer. "Set it before my master, for he above all others is entitled to it."

"He is not," retorted Loegaire and Connal in the same breath.

"No?" Cuchulain drew his sword.

Leering down from his balcony, Bricriu congratulated himself. That there would be blood spilled he did not doubt.

Leaping over tables, upsetting couches, the trio clashed.

"Stop them! Stop them, I say!" It was Sencha intervening.

Not without difficulty were they separated.

"Now hearken to me," commanded Sencha. "There must be no more fighting here. When the feast is over let you go to Cu Roi macDairi for a judgment. The one to whom he allots the Champion's Portion then his will it be."

Bricriu fumed as the three, mollified, returned to their tables. Such a peaceful solution was not at all to his liking. Quickly he cast about in his mind for a way to stir up further strife. Surveying the hall, his eyes came to rest on the women of Ulster. Divided from the men, they occupied the south side of the hall. Why not set them at variance? he pondered. When women fought they outstripped men. They were better, more consistent haters. But how to rouse them? He turned to his wife for advice. It was not long before the two of them had thought of a plan.

Presently Loegaire's wife, Fedlem Fresh-Heart, chanced by, accompanied by her handmaidens.

"Hail, thou fairest of maidens!" Bricriu called out to her. "So perfect your beauty, so famed your

gifts, you should enjoy sovereignty over all the women of Ulster."

Fedlem Fresh-Heart smiled, pleased by the compliment.

"And you can," Bricriu went on, "if you but step first over the boundary line of the hall tonight when the warriors call upon their women folk to join them."

"Then that I will do," Fedlem Fresh-Heart resolved. "It will not go well with her that tries to precede me."

A while later Lendabair, Connal's wife, happened along and to her Bricriu repeated what he had told Fedlem Fresh-Heart.

Lendabair's eyes blazed determinedly. "No one shall go before me," she vowed.

And then came Emer, beautiful Emer, and Bricriu told her the same thing.

"She that disputes my right to the sovereignty had best make her peace with the gods," said Emer.

The stage was set. Bricriu winked at his wife and chortled.

Now, during a lull in the feast, Fedlem Fresh-Heart, Lendabair and Emer, each accompanied by fifty handmaidens, went for a stroll to a spot three ridges distant from the palace. On their way back they heard Bricriu calling to them that their husbands wished them to join them. At first they tried to make their pace seem unhurried but gradually it developed into a run and they raced across

the sward. So great was the noise they made that King Conchubar and the warriors of Ulster thought themselves beset by an enemy. Hastily they sprang to the weapon racks to make ready for the fray. But Sencha, looking out, saw who it was coming and guessed what had happened.

"Put up your arms and bar the doors," he cried. "Bricriu has stirred up strife among the women. If we permit them to enter there will surely be trouble."

Emer, having outdistanced her rivals, arrived just as the last door was closed.

"Let me in! Let me in!" she begged, beating on the panels with her tiny fists.

Cuchulain jumped up but King Conchubar bade him stay where he was.

"Let us be guided by Sencha in this matter," he said.

"This," said Sencha, "must not be a warfare of arms, but a warfare of words."

"What do you mean?" asked King Conchubar.

"Let each woman recite her claims to the sovereignty from outside and we will judge who is entitled to it."

"A sensible idea," lauded King Conchubar.

Placing themselves under the protection of their husbands on the inside, the women prepared for the verbal fray.

Fedlem Fresh-Heart spoke first. Said she, "I, Fedlem Fresh-Heart, am of royal blood. I am

beautiful and fair of form in the eyes of all men. I am of lawful behavior and mannerly ways. My husband, Loegaire Buadach the Battle-Winner, is the mightiest warrior in all the land. He has rid the boundaries of our enemies by himself, unaided. He is greater than other heroes; his deeds surpass theirs by far. So why should not I, Fedlem Fresh-Heart, his wife, be given sovereignty over the women of Ulster?"

"Speak, Lendabair," Sencha ordered from within.

And Lendabair began, "I am of noble blood. I too have beauty and fairness of form and sense superior to that of other women. My husband, Connal the Victorious, who has not heard his name? He returns to me from the battlefield; the heads of his enemies dangling in his hands. He patrols the border and accepts challenges and overcomes the foes of Ulster. There is no earthly reason why I, Lendabair, should not come first into the hall to-night and be awarded sovereignty over the women of Ulster."

"Speak, Emer," Sencha said.

"I am of royal blood. From my father's palace in Luglochta Loga came I here. You, the warriors of Ulster, said then there was not a more beautiful maiden treading the earth. But it is of my husband I would speak. Cuchulain! He is my husband. A boar for valor in all truth is he. None can compare with him. Consider his feats! And is not his darling body disfigured with wounds

received in the service of Ulster? So make haste and open up now and admit me, Emer, and on me confer sovereignty over the women of Ulster."

Hearing what the women said, Loegaire and Connal started up and, before anyone could stop them, tore two holes in the walls to let in their wives. But Cuchulain was before them. He lifted up the whole side of the palace so that the sky, the moon and the stars shone through and Emer ran in fast followed by her fifty handmaidens.

"Hoho! hoho!" It is to laugh to think of what happened next.

When Cuchulain let go the side of the palace it slipped and crashed seven feet down into the ground. Nor was that all. Bricriu's balcony was dislodged and he was tossed into a ditch below in the courtyard where the dogs were kept.

To be sure Bricriu did not think it a laughing matter. In fact he was very much put out and it is what he did he laid a taboo on the warriors of Ulster not to eat, drink nor sleep till they righted his fine palace.

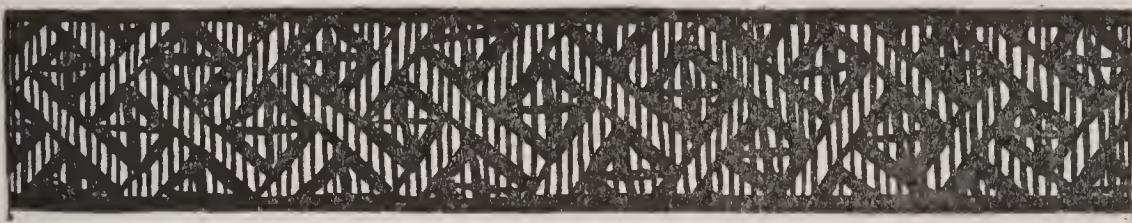
Oh dear! 'Twould seem that it was easier to do the damage than to repair it. Although they strained themselves until their muscles ached, the warriors of Ulster were unable to budge the sunken wall. In their distress they appealed to Sencha.

"Cuchulain is responsible," said Sencha. "So let him fix it."

And so Cuchulain got up and tugged at the wall

but it did not give an inch. Then his battle-fury rose up in him and he exerted himself to the limit of his endurance. His hair was drawn back into his head and his scalp glistened with drops of blood. Slowly, with agonizing slowness, the wall began to yield. Calling upon himself for a final effort, he heaved a mighty heave that stretched his ribs six inches apart and swung the wall back into place.

You would think that after that the feast proceeded without any further disturbance, wouldn't you? But no. Bricriu had sewed the seeds of dissension only too well. The quarrel over the Champion's Portion broke out afresh and it was not until Sencha reminded the disputants that they had agreed to go to Cu Roi macDairi for a judgment that peace was restored.



## CHAPTER EIGHTEEN

### *The Giant in the Lush Meadow*

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ON the morrow Loegaire, Connal and Cuchulain prepared to leave for the stronghold of Cu Roi macDairi.

“You go first, O Connal,” said Cuchulain.

“I will not,” Connal refused.

“You are afraid,” mocked Cuchulain. “You want to follow in somebody else’s chariot tracks. The green way you handle your horses and your rickety old chariot is a laughing stock.”

“Do you mind what he is after saying, Loegaire?” implored Connal.

Loegaire shrugged his shoulders.

“Do not blame me,” he said loftily. “I am a champion in the chariot. I am a wizard at crossing fords. On high or low ground am I equally at home. I drive my horses skillfully through narrow passes and my chariot at the end of a journey is as it was in the beginning; unscathed, without a scratch.”

Having delivered himself so boastfully, he leaped into his chariot and away with him.

Swiftly he rolled across the Plain of the Two

Forks, through the Gap of the Watch, over the Ford of Carpat Fergus, over the Ford of Morrigu, through the Rowan Meadow of the Two Oxen in the Fews of Armagh, onward past the meeting of the Four Ways outside Dundalk and thence westward to the slope of Breg.

There he was forced to pull up. A dark and heavy mist lay over the ground and he could not see his way.

“Let us remain here until the mist clears,” he proposed to his gilly.

Then he got down from the chariot and the gilly unyoked and turned the horses loose in a nearby meadow.

But while he was yet in the meadow the gilly saw a giant coming towards him.

How are we to describe the monstrous creature? To the gilly he must have appeared as did Gulliver to the Lilliputians; towering tall and out of all proportion to the general scheme of things. The ground quaked beneath his step and over his shoulder he carried a whittled oak tree as a club.

“Whose horses have you there, gilly?” he roared wrathfully.

The gilly’s teeth chattered like castanets. “The ho-horses of my ma—master, Lo—Loegaire Bu-Buadach, the Ba—Battle-Wi—Winner.”

“Do you tell me so?” raged the giant, lifting up his club and smiting the gilly a blow that shook him from head to toe.

The gilly screamed for help.

Loegaire came running. "What are you doing to the lad?" he demanded of the giant.

"Revenging the damage your horses have done my lush meadow," replied he.

"If that be so it is up to me to revenge the damage you have done my gilly."

And Loegaire charged him with drawn sword.

"Hoho! hoho!" laughed the giant. "I'll take some of the starch out of you, my fine hero."

Reaching out a hairy fist he caught hold of Loegaire by the scruff of the neck and hurled him over a mountain seven miles away.

Loegaire picked himself up and fled for his life, leaving his gilly, his chariot and horses behind. He was genuinely afraid.

Presently Connal the Victorious, following in Loegaire's tracks, came to that very same place and since the mist was as thick as ever—like home-made pea soup, 'twas—he got down from his chariot and the gilly unyoked the horses and turned them loose in the meadow.

"Gilly, who is your master?" demanded the giant, rising up out of the tall grass where he had been taking a nap.

"Connal the Victorious," replied the gilly shakily.

"Another hero!" And the giant struck the gilly a blow that rattled his bones.

The gilly let out a cry.

Connal hurried to the scene. "For why do you beat my gilly?" he wanted to know.

"For why did he set your horses grazing my lush meadow?" said the giant.

Whereupon they came to blows. The giant let go with a kick. Connal went soaring through the air. When he regained consciousness he found himself in the middle of the Peeled Plain twenty miles away and without looking behind him once, he started out at a run for Emain Macha, leaving his gilly, his chariot and horses to their fate.

It was not long before Cuchulain drove up. The mist now was as black as night. To proceed would have been impossible. So he got down from his chariot and the gilly turned the horses loose in the meadow.

"Whose horses have you there?" thundered the giant.

"They belong to Cuchulain." And the gilly trembled in every limb.

"Cuchulain, is it?"

Snorting fire, the giant brought down his club with a terrific whack.

"Help, I'm murdered," yelled the gilly.

Into the meadow ran Cuchulain. "What ails you? Who murdered you?" Then he saw the giant. Without another word he flew at him.

The gilly was fond of saying that never in all his days had he seen such an elegant fight as that which followed. Back and forth the length of the meadow





Cuchulain and the giant battled, trampling the lush grass down into the ground till it looked like a ploughed field. There was no quarter given. None was expected. One minute Cuchulain seemed to be on top, the next it was the giant that had the upper hand. But the end came with unexpected suddenness. Cuchulain snatched away the giant's club and forced it down his cavernous throat. With a horrible gurgling sound, the giant fell, choked to death.

After this we have no doubt that Cuchulain was entitled to the Champion's Portion. But will it be awarded to him? Time alone will tell.



## CHAPTER NINETEEN

### *At the Court of Ailill and Maeve*

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WHEN Cuchulain returned to Emain Macha he brought with him the gillies, horses and chariots of his rivals.

“Yours is the Champion’s Portion, O Cuchulain,” cried Bricriu of the Bitter-Tongue.

“Not so! Not so!” protested Connal and Loegaire. “The giant in the lush meadow was a friend of Cuchulain’s from the fairy world with whom he conspired to deprive us of our claim to the championship.”

“What’s this? What’s this?” interjected Sencha, the learned man, seeing that a fight was imminent.

Connal and Loegaire repeated their false accusa-

tion, adding, "If he killed the giant as he says, why did he not cut off his head and bring it in with him for us all to see?"

"Why, Cuchulain?" queried Sencha.

"Why does a cat turn aside from the head of a rat?"

"You would have us believe then that the giant was in some way contaminated?"

"Yes. When I forced the club down his throat there issued forth from his mouth a stream of black blood side by side with a stream of green bile; bile of anger that the druids hold to be deadly poison."

"Your explanation rings true, O Cuchulain," Sencha admitted. "Nevertheless I think you had better go with Connal and Loegaire to the court of Ailill and Maeve for a final decision."

Ailill and Maeve were King and Queen of Connaught and their palace was at the rath of Cruachan.

"That I am willing to do, O Sencha," Cuchulain replied. "For what I have once won, I can win once again."

This time King Conchubar and the men of Ulster decided to accompany the trio. Chariots were called for, farewells made and they were off, that is all except Cuchulain who lingered behind amusing the women of Ulster with his feats. Nine feats with apples, nine with spears and nine with knives did he perform at one and the same time and in such a manner that no one feat interfered with the other.

Then he borrowed three times fifty needles and tossed them high into the air so that each needle went through the eye of the other. Afterwards he returned each woman her needle into her own hand. But by that time O'Loeg, his charioteer, was out of patience with him.

"You poor amadan," he chided. "You have lost the Champion's Portion. Connal and Loegaire are well on their way to Cruachan."

Cuchulain started up.

"Yoke the chariot," he ordered. "So pleasantly was I engaged the matter slipped my mind."

Connal and Loegaire were passing the slope of Breg when they heard Cuchulain come thundering along from behind. Furiously, they prodded their horses. The poor beasts responded gallantly. But sure they were no match at all for Cuchulain's Grey of Macha and Black of Sainglenn, the finest team in the land. With a taunting cry he passed them by and as he disappeared over the horizon they saw him turn and wave mockingly.

So you see although he started last Cuchulain arrived first at the rath of Cruachan.

Queen Maeve was startled by the noise of his approach.

"This is the first time I hear thunder and the sky blue!" she exclaimed.

"'Tis not thunder, Mother dear, but a chariot that comes this way," corrected her daughter, Finnabair.

"A chariot! Describe it," urged Queen Maeve.

"A grey horse and a black horse. A chariot with wheels of white bronze. In the chariot a youth in armor; his face dimpled with four dimples of . . ."

"Enough! enough!" interrupted Queen Maeve.  
"'Tis Cuchulain. If he comes in anger we are lost."

Suddenly the rumbling out on the plain was magnified a hundred-fold.

Queen Maeve's eyes widened with wonder. "Who comes this time?" she asked.

"An host of the men of Ulster," said Finnabair, looking out from her balcony.

"An host of them!" Queen Maeve hurried away to give orders for their reception. Her voice echoed throughout the palace. "Handmaidens, prepare to put hearty welcome before the men of Ulster! Bring out vats of cold water. Ready the beds! Set forth fine food in plenty! Let there be ale on draught—our best ale! Gatemen, open wide the gates! In such great numbers do they come, it is to be hoped they won't kill us."

How in the world room was ever found for them all is something of a mystery. Cuchulain, Connal and Loegaire were allotted separate houses. King Conchubar and the warriors of Ulster were lodged in the palace. 'Twas a big palace to be sure; as big if not bigger than Emain Macha and Emain Macha was no cottage as we very well know.

The etiquette of the court demanded that they be entertained three days and three nights before

discussing the object of their visit. And they were entertained and right royally, too. To attempt to describe the feasting we would have to borrow the palate of a gourmet. It seems a pity that one is not available at the moment. On the morning of the fourth day Sencha rose up before Ailill and Maeve and revealed the cause of the dispute between the three heroes. Ailill seemed reluctant to sit in judgment. It was outside his province to rule on such a question, he protested. Sencha pressed him. There was no better, no fairer judge, he pointed out. Ailill sighed and relented. He would require time, he said. They would not come to blows over that, Sencha promised.

Thus with the arrangements concluded, King Conchubar and the warriors of Ulster returned to Emain Macha. Only Cuchulain, Connal and Loegaire remained behind to await Ailill's judgment.

There was a fairy cave on the hill of Cruachan. In fact 'tis still there for all we know. To guard against their enemies the fairy people kept three enchanted cats forever stationed at the entrance. Big and fierce as tigers were these cats and black all over except their eyes that shone green by day and flaming yellow come nightfall.

But how do they concern us?

Listen!

Ailill was friendly with the fairy people. He left milk out for them every night and did them no end

of favors. So when he wanted to test the courage of the three heroes it seemed only natural that he should petition the fairy people for a loan of the cats.

That same night when the heroes were supping, each in his own house, he let the cats loose against them. As they pushed open the doors Loegaire and Connal made for the rafters and there remained the night long in fear and trembling. But Cuchulain faced the cat that invaded his house and struck out at it with his sword. Much to his surprise the blow glanced off it as if it were stone. Still it made no further attempt to attack him. Instead it lay down at his feet and went to sleep.

At cockcrow next morning all three cats silently and mysteriously vanished.

Shortly Ailill put in an appearance.

Loegaire and Connal were still in the rafters, afraid to come down. Cuchulain sat calmly in a chair.

“It was I that sent the cats against you,” Ailill confessed. “I wanted to test your courage before handing down a judgment. Now I know it is to Cuchulain the Champion’s Portion must go.”

“Not so! Not so!” Connal and Loegaire declared angrily. “It is men we strive against, not beasts.”

Disheartened by such perfidy, Ailill returned to the palace.

Noticing his sorrowful demeanor, Queen Maeve

suggested that he send the three heroes to be tested by Ercol, her foster father.

That seemed like a sensible idea and Ailill packed them off at once.

So soon as they arrived Ercol dispatched them to fight the witches that infested the valley below his stronghold.

Loegaire fared forth first. He was not long gone. Even so the witches had scrawbed him out of all recognition and torn the clothes off his back and disarmed him.

Connal went next. Presently he came limping back. Not for ten Champion's Portions would he face those witches again, he panted. Not content with nearly rending him limb from limb they had deprived him of his fine spear to boot.

Oh, it is no lie but the truth; they were terrors entirely; and savage!

Undaunted Cuchulain went down into the valley. Screaming and hissing the witches came against him. He fought valiantly. But for all that the witches bested him. They broke his spear, burst his shield and tore his clothes to tatters.

Disgusted at seeing him fare so poorly O'Loeg, his charioteer, called out in derision, "Shame on you! Is it a parcel of old squinting hags you would be letting get the better of you?"

Cuchulain's battle-fury flamed to new heights and he lashed out right and left with his sword. One by one he downed the witches. They were

cut practically to ribbons; their blood colored red the entire valley.

As proof of his victory he took their cloaks back in with him. Sulking in a corner and nursing their wounds, Connal and Loegaire eyed him jealously.

The following morning Ercol challenged them to single combat. They were to come against him on horseback one by one and man and horse would battle man and horse.

Again Loegaire went first and as on the previous day made a poor showing. His horse was killed by Ercol's horse and to escape a similar fate himself he beat a hasty retreat, nor did he stop in his running until he came to Cruachan.

Then it was Connal's turn. Connal the Victorious! Can't you see him proudly mounting his prancing stallion and riding into the fray?

Wisha! Wisha! He should have stayed at home. If ever there was a pair he and Loegaire were it. Honestly, we blush for him. So soon as his horse was killed he ran for dear life and when he came to Cruachan he told Ailille and Maeve that Ercol had killed Cuchulain.

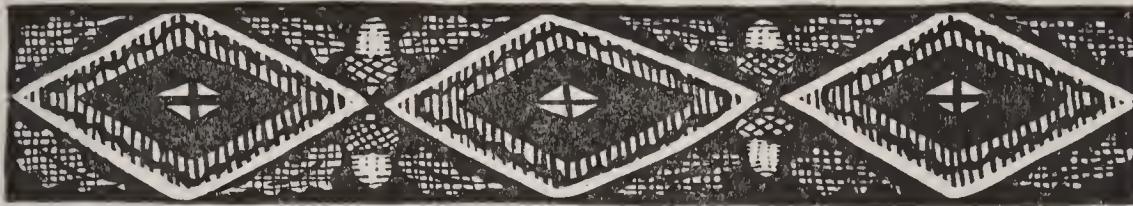
But Cuchulain had thrown his leg over the Grey of Macha and "the Grey" reared up and killed Ercol's horse. Ercol fell headlong and Cuchulain sprang on top of him and tied him to the back of his chariot and carted him off to Cruachan.

Imagine how he must have felt when he found the people keening and in mourning for him when

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he got there. Had not Ailill not come between them he would surely have killed Connal.

As to Ailill's judgment . . . well, turn to the next chapter.



## CHAPTER TWENTY

### *The Three Cups*

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FOR three days and nights after the return of the heroes Ailill set his back to his chamber wall and pondered how to award the Champion's Portion to Cuchulain without incurring the enmity of Connal and Loegaire.

At the end of that time Queen Maeve grew impatient and accused him of being cowardly. "If you do not soon decide it is I that will decide for you," she threatened.

"Och, 'twas the black day for me the day I intervened; the black day," moaned Ailill.

"Oh come now," blustered Queen Maeve, "'tis not so difficult as all that. Loegaire and Connal differ as brown bronze and white bronze while Connal and Cuchulain differ as white bronze from red gold."

In order to grasp her meaning, it will be necessary for us to scrutinize carefully the events that followed.

First of all Queen Maeve sent for Loegaire.

"A welcome before you, O Loegaire Buadach the

Battle-Winner," she greeted him warmly. "It is to you we have decided to award the championship. From this day forth yours is the sovereignty of the heroes of Erin and the Champion's Portion and this cup of *brown bronze* with a silver bird chased upon it as a token of the award. Take the cup with you now but conceal it against your return to Emain Macha. Display it there when the men of Ulster are met together in the great, banqueting hall of the Red Branch and none will dispute the championship with you."

In a dream Loegaire accepted the cup and put it to his lips, for 'twas filled to the brim with wine of an ancient vintage.

"A toast to you, O Queen," said he. "May the years pass lightly as days and the days lightly as minutes over thy beauty."

"And you, may you enjoy sovereignty a hundred years over the warriors of Ulster," returned Queen Maeve.

Loegaire then took his departure and Queen Maeve summoned Connal.

"A welcome before you, Connal the Victorious," she said to him. "Know that it is to you we have decided to award the championship. From this day forth yours is the sovereignty of the heroes of Erin and the Champion's Portion and this cup of *white bronze* with a gold bird chased upon it as a token of the award. Take the cup with you now but conceal it against your return to Emain Macha. Dis-

play it there when the warriors of Ulster are met together in the great banqueting hall of the Red Branch and none will dispute the championship with you."

Whereupon Connal toasted her as follows: "May the gods ever smile benignly on you, O Queen, for verily you are one of their own; 'tis marked on your noble brow and in your eyes that set men's hearts to thumping wildly."

"And you, may you enjoy sovereignty a hundred years over the warriors of Ulster," replied Queen Maeve.

And then she sent for Cuchulain.

Cuchulain at the time was playing chess with O'Loeg and thought that the Queen's messenger was mocking him. "Go tell your lies to another," he told him, calmly moving a pawn.

What else could the poor page do but tell this to Queen Maeve?

"Ah," sighed she, "Cuchulain's rage is upon him because we have not awarded him the Champion's Portion ere this." And rising up she went out to him and placed her two arms about his neck.

"Work your wiles on another," said Cuchulain crossly.

"Ah, thou bravest of all the Ulstermen, it is not on you we would be practicing our wiles," said Queen Maeve. "Were all the heroes of Erin to come here this day it is to yourself we would give first preference; for thy fame, thy bravery, thy

valor, thy distinction, thy youth and thy glory are unequalled in the land."

Then she led him into Ailill and presented him with a cup of *red gold* with birds chased upon it in precious stones and she gave him too a beautiful dragon stone the size of your fist. "Conceal them," she bade him, "until you are come again to Emain Macha. Display them there when the warriors of Ulster are met together in the great banqueting hall of the Red Branch and none will dispute the championship with you."

Cuchulain's delight knew no bounds.

"Moreover," added Queen Maeve, "we have decided that since you are first among the warriors of Ulster it is but meet that Emer, your wife, should be first among the women. She should always precede them into the banqueting hall."

Then Cuchulain put the cup of red gold to his lips. "A health to you, O Queen," he toasted. "Long may your life be, untroubled your reign, unfading your beauty that makes you the desire of the land."

What Queen Maeve meant is now apparent. She had rated the abilities of the three heroes in metals. It was a clever idea, for by giving each of the heroes a cup she was rid of them without incurring their enmity, at least for the time being anyway. But will the dispute be settled when the brown bronze cup and the white bronze cup and the red gold cup are displayed at Emain Macha? What do *you* think?



## CHAPTER TWENTY-ONE

### *The Stronghold of Cu Roi macDairi*

UPON their return to Emain Macha, King Conchubar gave a banquet in honor of the three heroes. Believing as they did, each of them, that the championship was his, they could hardly contain themselves until the attendants brought in the Champion's Portion. At length one of the warriors of Ulster—Dubhtach Chafertongue his name was—rose out of his sitting and in a loud voice said, “Why is not the Champion's Portion set before one of the heroes? Surely they have with them some token whereby we may know the winner?”

Loegaire leaped to his feet, holding aloft the brown bronze cup with the silver bird chased upon

it. "Here is the token!" he cried. "Mine is the Champion's Portion!"

Already Connal was pounding the table. "Not so fast there, Loegaire, my fine friend," he cautioned. "For I too bring a token; a finer token than yours. 'Tis of white bronze with a gold bird chased upon it. So it is to me the Champion's Portion must be awarded."

Meanwhile Cuchulain was chuckling to himself at the trick Maeve had played on his rivals. Nor did he say a word until the warriors of Ulster had carefully examined the two tokens and come to the conclusion that Connal indeed was entitled to the championship. Then he sprang his surprise.

"The Champion's Portion belongs neither to Loegaire nor Connal," he said authoritatively. "Ailill and Maeve gave them those tokens by way of consolation. Behold my tokens!" And he passed around his cup of red gold with the birds chased upon it with precious stones and his dragon stone as big as your fist.

The warriors of Ulster examined them critically at first and then admiringly.

"Cuchulain has the right of it," they ruled enthusiastically. "His tokens are more valuable than the other two put together. We are sure it was for him Ailill and Maeve intended the Champion's Portion."

Scarce able to credit what had happened Lo-

gaire and Connal began to rave and rant. "We swear by the gods we will not accept this judgment," they shouted. "Cuchulain gave of his treasures and his jewels to Ailill and Maeve for those tokens so that a defeat might not be recorded against him."

Then with drawn swords they advanced against him.

Fortunately King Conchubar was in the hall. "Hold!" he cried. "I will not have any fighting in the hall of the Red Branch. Sheathe your weapons and be guided by Sencha."

Where the trio might have disobeyed another they did not dare disobey their king. Meekly, they put up their swords.

"Now," said Sencha, "since there is still strife between you, it is what you must do, you must go to Cu Roi macDairi for a judgment."

"We went once already," grumbled Loegaire.

Sencha shot him a dark look. "I seem to remember, Loegaire," he chastised him, "that you least of all arrived there."

At that everybody laughed and it was generally understood that the three heroes would set out on the morrow.

This time they encountered no giant on the way. They unyoked at the gate of Cu Roi's stronghold. Blathnat, Cu Roi's daughter, put welcome before them. Cu Roi himself was not at home. He was campaigning in Scythia on the shores of the Black

Sea. But knowing by his gift of foresight that the three heroes would arrive in his absence he had instructed Minn, his wife, regarding them.

A strange man this Cu Roi. Not since he was seven and took up arms had he blooded his sword in Erin. Nor had he ever tasted of the food of the country. He spent the greater part of his time in foreign parts and no Irish king could win allegiance from him though they tried often enough, dear knows. Moreover, no matter where he was, be it Africa, China, India or Scythia or even Greece, he never failed to chant a spell over his stronghold every night, causing it to spin around like a top so that the entrance could not be found after sundown. Truly, he was a mysterious and powerful being. Doubtless he had studied the mystic lore of the East and knew endless occult secrets. But anyway Minn always respected his wishes and where Cuchulain, Connal and Loegaire were concerned fulfilled his instructions to the letter.

Come bedtime she told them they must take turns guarding the fort at night according to seniority until Cu Roi returned.

This gave Loegaire the first night's watch. Donning his armored tunic and buckling on his sword he went out into the dark. And it was dark! Indeed, it was a woeful night for a man to be out of doors. A gale was blowing in from the sea. The wind howled dismally like a woman weeping. The sky was moonless, starless; it was a brooding black

sky. Still Loegaire managed to grope his way to the sentry seat in a sheltered nook outside the wall of the fort.

Slowly the hours passed. Rain began to fall around midnight; a heavy driving rain. Occasionally a flash of lightning divided the sky to be fast followed by a long drawn out, rumbling peal of thunder. Gradually, almost reluctantly, the dawn crept over the horizon. First it was blue and then grey and a rooster inside the stronghold heralded its coming with a clarion cry. The sound was sweet music to Loegaire. A few more hours and he would be able to turn in, he thought. He yawned luxuriously, stretched himself and proceeded to watch the changing color of the sky.

All of a sudden a monstrous shadow came creeping from out the west. It was the shadow of a man, of a giant; for he came quickly in the wake of his shadow. Loegaire had seen giants before, but never one so big, so hideous, so horrible as this. He might well have been a Cyclops or related to that race of man-eaters. Like the Cyclopes he had but one eye, or seemed to have but one since he wore a steel buckler over his face with a small hole pierced in the middle, corresponding to a single eye. Loegaire could see the sea sparkling between his legs and a veritable forest of trees dangling in his arms. What was he to do? Run? Where to? The stronghold was still revolving. He could not hope to find shelter there. Out in front was a plain that

ran for miles and miles and where there was no hiding place, no refuge of any kind.

Swiftly the giant came towards him. Loegaire prepared to defend himself. As he did the giant threw a tree at him. He dodged to one side and it went hurtling by. He threw another and yet another. Both overshot their mark. Then Loegaire hurled his spear at him with all his might. Alas, he missed him. Then the giant reached over the three mountain ridges separating them and picked him up in his horny hand. He felt helpless in his clutch. He began to squeeze him, close his fist on him. A red mist swam before his eyes and his pulse began beating like hammers in a forge. And then . . . then he was flying, flying through the air with incredible speed. The giant had thrown him from him as he would a fly. With a sickening squelch he landed in a muddy pool inside the fort wall.

When the men and women of the stronghold came out for the day's work they found him there and since there was no entrance at that particular point, they naturally thought he had jumped the wall to challenge his rivals to the same feat.

Quick to take advantage of their credulity, Loegaire made no attempt to disillusion them. Bruised and sore though he was he limped indoors, snickering to himself at the thought of his rivals trying to clear the wall; an almost impossible task. It stood thirty feet if it stood an inch.

The next night it was Connal's turn to mount guard. Except that it was a fine night his experiences differed not a whit from those of Loegaire. The giant came shortly after dawn. He picked him up in his hand. He squeezed him. He flung him over the wall. He landed in a muddy pool and he allowed the people of the stronghold to believe that he had jumped the wall.

Then came the third night and it was Cuchulain's turn.

Cuchulain was not long in his sitting on the sentry seat when he saw coming towards him over the plain nine ghastly grey shapes. He knew not what to make of them. They might have been ghosts.

"Hallo! hallo!" he called out. "Who goes there? Halt if it is friends that are in it!"

The nine ghastly grey shapes raised a piercing wail and came stealthily forward.

Cuchulain unsheathed his sword.

"One more step and your lives are forfeit," he threatened.

His warning went unheeded. They continued to approach. There was nothing else for it but to attack them.

We cannot describe the fight because it was fought in the dark. But Cuchulain killed all nine and cut off their heads and made a pile of them beside the sentry seat.

Soon afterwards another band of nine like to the first drew near and then another band. He dis-

patched them all and added their heads to the pile, and with less ado than the first batch.

With the coming of daylight he was to recognize them as wicked thieves who had disguised themselves as ghosts that they might more easily plunder Cu Roi's stronghold.

But the night and its terrors were not yet over for him.

As he sat tired and dejected, keeping the watch, he heard the waters of the lake on his left rising and heaving as if by some enchantment turning into a stormy, wave-lashed sea. Curious, he rose up and went to see what was the matter.

What *was* the matter?

A long-necked monster was rising up out of the middle of the lake, that's what.

It was a terrifying spectacle. The monster of Cuchulain's adventure in Scotland was a bird of Paradise compared to this one.

Slimy and drooling it moved its ponderous bulk onto dry land. Then, stretching out its neck, it lumbered off towards the stronghold, opening its mouth as it went; intent on swallowing the place lock, stock and barrel.

But it reckoned without Cuchulain.

Remembering the swooping feat taught him by Scatach, the woman-warrior, he sprang high into the air and swooped down on the monster, entwining his arms about its neck. In vain did it try to shake him off. Slowly he began to shin up to its

mouth. Then, swinging himself around, he plunged his hand down its throat and tore out its heart. It stumbled . . . fell. Cuchulain cut off its head and added it to his growing pile.

By that time it was dawn, time for the giant to make his appearance if he were coming.

Oh, he came all right!

“Sad night,” said he, surveying the pile of heads.

“It’s going to be sad for you too, you big gom,” said Cuchulain.

Whereupon the giant hurled a tree at him.

Cuchulain doubled up and it went over his head and buried itself in the ground.

The giant fired two more with the same result. Then Cuchulain hurled his spear at him. The giant laughed as it whizzed by his ear and reached over the three mountain ridges to pick him up.

Once more Cuchulain had recourse to his swooping feat. High up into the air he shot like an arrow and circled ’round the giant’s head with drawn sword.

The giant pleaded pitifully for his life.

“My three wishes and you go free,” bargained Cuchulain.

“State them in one breath.”

“The Championship of Erin, the Champion’s Portion and sovereignty for my wife over the women of Ulster.”

“Granted,” said the giant, disappearing instantly.

Well, of course, that was all very well, but had

we been Cuchulain we would have asked the giant to lift us over the wall.

But then—alas!—we are not Cuchulain. He really believed that Connal and Loegaire had jumped the wall and he would have considered it dishonorable—more power to him!—to take advantage of them.

So he took a running jump at it and nearly made it but not quite. The trouble was he was tired out. Nevertheless, he tried again only to fail miserably.

“Ochone, ochone,” he sighed, “I will surely lose the Champion’s Portion.”

But for all that he began at once to prepare for another attempt. First, he sprang backwards, somersaulting in mid-air and then he rebounded, somersaulting again and landing before the wall. Next he leaped high until he could see over the top of the wall into the stronghold. After that he ran swiftly over the ground, but so swiftly that he did not disturb the dewdrops clinging precariously to each individual blade of grass. He felt in good trim then. Going back thirty paces, he crouched low, counted up to three and was off to a flying start.

By the powers, what a leap! What a darling of a leap! He was over like a hare. His footprints are still to be seen where he landed on the flags before Cu Roi’s door.

Entering the house, he heaved a great sigh and Blathnat, Cu Roi’s daughter, came to comfort him.

"That is not the sigh of one who has tasted defeat," said she. "It is a victor's sigh. Well do I know what you have been through this night."

And even as she spoke her father, back from Scythia, had halted before Cuchulain's pile of heads out by the sentry box. "The winner of these trophies," he murmured, "is indeed a champion of champions." And gathering them up, he brought them in with him.

"Welcome before you, Cu Roi macDairi," greeted Cuchulain.

"These your trophies?" said Cu Roi.

"His," said Blathnat, answering for him.

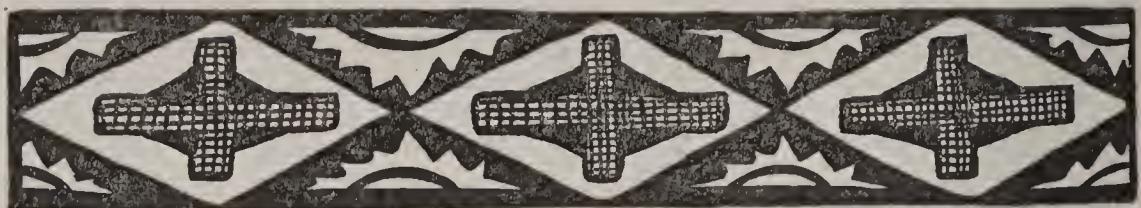
"Then it is to him the Champion's Portion must go," ruled Cu Roi and as a token of the award he gave him the worth of seven bondmaidens in gold and silver.

Furious, does not properly describe Connal and Loegaire. "We will not accept that judgment," they shrieked—they actually shrieked.

"I will come myself to Emain Macha," Cu Roi answered them sternly, "and when I do Cuchulain will prove before King Conchubar and the warriors of Ulster that he and he alone is entitled to the championship."

"Come to Emain Macha by all means," jeered Connal and Loegaire. "But it is not to Cuchulain the Champion's Portion will go."

And with that they took their departure.



## CHAPTER TWENTY-TWO

### *In Which the Champion's Portion Is Awarded*

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Not long afterwards, on a day when the warriors of Ulster, tired of their games, had deserted the playing fields in favor of the drinking hall, they saw a tall ungainly churl coming towards them. Cuchulain was not with them at the time, nor was Connal, neither was Loegaire. It seemed to them that the churl was at least twice as big as the tallest of them. He wore an old frayed hide and a prison-grey cloak that fluttered about his person in tatters. Balanced across his shoulder, he carried a huge beech tree that would have given summer shade to a whole herd of sun-tormented, fly-beridden cattle. Terrible eyes he had; yellow, bloodshot and savage. As thick as a strong man's wrist were each of his fingers. In his left hand he bore a great oaken block and in his right an axe weighing three times fifty cauldrons of molten metal. A team of horses would have been hard put to haul the handle and it was that sharp it split hairs blown against it by the wind.

Of his own accord—without as much as a may

I—he entered the hall and picked out a place for himself by the fork-beam alongside the fire.

“Who are you at all at all?” inquired Dubhtacht Chafertongue. “And are you comfortable? Have you room enough? Maybe you would like us all to clear out? Maybe you want to be alone?”

If nothing else his sarcasm won him a hearty laugh from his fellows. Certainly it in no wise annoyed the churl.

“My name is Utah,” he said, “Utah the Stranger. Came I here in search of something I have not been able to find in Erin; no, nor in Alba, nor Europe, nor Africa, nor Asia, nor have I been able to find a man that would deal squarely with me regarding it. Upon being told therefore that the warriors of Ulster were renowned above all others for their honesty as well as their strength, prowess, valor, and dignity, I made my way here, hoping to find one among you that would grant me my boon.”

“Faith, it seems to me that the honor of the province is at stake!” ejaculated Fergus macRogh.

“What is the boon?” pressed Dubhtacht Chafer-tongue.

“It is that I want one of you to pick up my axe and cut off my head tonight and I will cut off his head tomorrow night.”

No, the writer has not suddenly taken leave of his senses. That is what he said. I know it sounds strange, even funny. But that cannot be helped.

“I make an exception of King Conchubar because

of his kingship," he continued, "and of Fergus macRogh because of his high position. But all others are eligible."

"There is no warrior here after those two," said Dubhtacht Chafertongue.

"Hold your horses! There will be in a minute!" cried Muremur macGerrind and he leaped out onto the floor of the hall.

Muremur whom we have not met before was one of the warriors of Ulster, supposedly possessed of the strength of a hundred.

"Bend down," he commanded the churl, "that I may cut off your head and you cut off mine tomorrow night."

Then he laid hold to the axe and the churl stretched his neck across the block. Muremur dealt him a blow. His head rolled to the floor and all at once the hall reeked and was filled with blood.

But a few minutes afterwards the churl got up, picked up his head and silently took his departure.

"By macDatho's Pig!" exclaimed Dubhtacht Chafertongue. "If after being killed tonight he comes back tomorrow night he will not leave a live man living in Ulster."

Did he come back? To be sure he came back and that lout Muremur ran away and hid himself out of sight, terrified.

But that night Loegaire Buadach the Battle-Winner was in the hall.

"Who of the warriors that contest the Champion's

Portion will grant me my boon?" asked the churl.

"I will, faith," volunteered Loegaire. And he did in so much as he lopped off the churl's head. But when the churl returned the following night he was nowhere to be found.

So that night it was Connal the Victorious that wielded the axe; but sure he like the others did not live up to his promise and the churl waxed indignant and began to berate the warriors of Ulster.

"A poor lot you are. Your honor is forever lost to you. But where is that mad lad, Cuchulain? Maybe his word is better than the others."

And Cuchulain who was present that night answered, "I want nothing to do with you."

"That's more than likely," taunted the churl. "It is what I expected of you. Greatly do you fear to die."

With that Cuchulain seized the axe and dealt him a blow that sent his head up in the rafters and the whole hall shook with the force of it. But the churl as before picked up his head and walked off.

On the morrow everybody was watching Cuchulain to see would he shirk the churl as Muremur, Loegaire and Connal had done. He appeared dejected, 'tis true—who would not? Still he made no effort to conceal himself.

When the churl came he called out for him in a loud voice.

"Here I am," said Cuchulain quietly.

"Ah, little one, few indeed are your words this

night," said the churl. "Great indeed is your fear of death. Even so you have kept your covenant with me."

Then did Cuchulain stretch his neck across the block that was so big his neck only reached half way across it.

"Stretch your neck, villain!" roared the churl.

"You are keeping me in torment," accused Cuchulain. "Last night I did not torment you but dispatched you without delay. Do you the same for me."

"I cannot slay you unless you stretch your neck," protested the giant.

Whereupon Cuchulain stretched his neck so that a bird could have nested in between any two of his ribs. The churl raised the axe till it touched the roof and the creaking of his old hide and the noise of the axe in the rafters was the noise of trees that fall struck by lightning of a stormy night.

But when the churl brought the axe down it was on its blunt side and it hit the floor.

"O Cuchulain arise!" cried he. "For you are first among the heroes of Erin; none can be found to compare with you in valor and truthfulness. The sovereignty of the heroes of Erin is yours from this day forth and the Champion's Portion and precedence to your wife over the women of Ulster. And whosoever shall dispute the championship with you henceforth, I swear by the gods of my people, his life will be endangered; he will thaw like ice."

A strange transformation had taken place in the churl as he spoke. Connal and Loegaire could not believe their eyes. But surely you have guessed? Yes, Utah the Stranger was Cu Roi macDairi in disguise come to keep his promise to Cuchulain.

And thus was the dispute over the Champion's Portion settled for all time; not that we ever doubted who it would go to for a moment.

Bravo Cuchulain!



PART FOUR

THE PASSING OF CUCHULAIN





## CHAPTER TWENTY-THREE

### *The Occasion of the Cattle Raid of Cooley*

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WHEN Scatach, the woman-warrior, foretold the future of Cuchulain she said among other things that he would be welcomed at the Cattle Raid of Cooley. Being come now to that part of our story that embraces the Cattle Raid of Cooley we shall begin by recounting the occasion of the raid.

It happened one time and Ailill and Maeve abed, they made pillow-talk.

“True it is,” said Ailill, “fortunate is the woman that has a rich man for husband.”

“Aye, ‘tis true,” Maeve agreed. “But why do you say so?”

"Because you are better off than before we were wedded."

"That," retorted Maeve, "is not so. I was wealthy in my own right from birth."

"'Tis strange that this is the first I hear of it," said Ailill. "A woman's wealth was all you had and that your foes thefted and you not raising a hand to stop them."

"A likely tale!" scoffed Maeve. "Eochaod, son of Finn, High King of Erin, was my father. Of his six daughters it is I was best of them, best in looks, in strife and in combat. Three times five hundred hostages and a like number of freedmen were my standing army. The province of Cruachan my father bestowed on me wherefore am I called Maeve of Cruachan. From early girlhood I was deafened with proposals of marriage. Messengers came from the King of Leinster seeking my hand, and from the King of Tara; aye, and from King Conchubar too, but I refused them, for it is I that demanded the unusual marriage-portion: a husband without meanness, without fear and without jealousy. It would have suited me ill that my husband have a tight fist and I generous, always with the open hand. Nor would it have pleased me to find him cowardly when I am a warrior without peer, a terror before heroes on the battlefield. And if he were jealous, my husband, he would not suit me either, for I never saw the day when I was not surrounded by admirers."

"And it was in you, Ailill, that I found such a husband. You were not mean nor cowardly nor jealous. And I wooed you and gave you the good purchase price, namely, the raiment of twelve men, a chariot worth three times seven bond-maidens, the width of your face of red gold and the weight of my left forearm of white bronze. And if it is the truth you seek, it is the slave of a woman you are, a man under a woman's keep."

"You do me wrong," protested Ailill. "For I am a king's son with two brothers even now serving their kingship, one over Tara, 'tother over Leinster, and I could have been king in their place but that they were older than me and I had compassion on them. Besides this was the only province in Erin under a woman's keeping. That is why I came here and took the kingship as my mother's successor, for was not my mother, Mata of Muresc, daughter of Matach, King of Connaught? And if I took you for wife it was that it seemed fitting I should have by my side a daughter of the High King of Erin."

"Even so," persisted Maeve, "my riches are greater than yours."

"You are dreaming, woman," belittled Ailill. "There is nobody in Erin with greater riches than myself."

"Dreaming, is it?" Maeve's eyes darted fire. "Let us have our riches brought forth for comparison and see who is dreaming."

Forthwith they arose and their attendants

brought before them their drinking vessels, their jugs, their vats, their eared pitchers and all things of the household and they found that neither had one more than the other. Then their brooches, their amulets, their rings, their chains were brought in and their raiment too; crimson raiment, purple, black and green, and again they found that neither had one more than the other. And so their horses were brought in and their flocks of sheep from the hillsides and their droves of swine from the woods but they did not find one the other could not match. Lastly their herds of cattle were rounded up from the lands adjoining the bogs and marshes. Heifer for heifer, bullock for bullock, cow for cow, calf for calf, and bull for bull, they were set aside. One bull remained. It was the best bull, the biggest bull, the champion bull of all. He was calved in Maeve's herds and Finnebennach, the White-horned was his name. But thinking it a disgrace to be owned by a woman he had gone over to Ailill of his own accord. And when Maeve saw him and realized that Ailill had one more bull and therefore more riches than she, she was so vexed you would think she did not have a rag to her name. But she did not admit defeat.

"Where," she asked macRoth, her messenger, "can I find just such another bull?"

"There is a bull every bit as good only better," said he, "in the house of Dairi in the province of Cooley; the Donn of Cooley is his name."

"Go at once then all speed to Dairi," ordered Maeve, "and ask him for me for the loan of the Donn of Cooley for a year and I will return him at the end of that time along with fifty prime heifers as a reward for the favor."

MacRoth left at once together with nine members of Maeve's court, for it was not fitting that he as chief messenger should travel alone.

Dairi gave him the fine welcome and asked him why they had journeyed thither. MacRoth told him, relating in full the quarrel between Ailill and Maeve.

"And," added he, "Maeve will give you fifty heifers as a reward if you make the loan."

That pleased Dairi. "By my oath," said he, "I will send the Donn of Cooley to Maeve without delay."

And then he feasted macRoth and the other messengers. Delicious was the food served up to them and strong and heady the mead, but in a little while they began to wrangle in a drunken way and this conversation took place between two of them.

"A kind host we have; a good man," said one.

"He's all of that," said the other.

"But there is one better in Ulster."

"That there is. You hit the nail on the head that time, my boy. Conchubar is the man that is better than he is and 'tis no shame for the men of Ulster to gather 'round him. And isn't it the great wonder entirely that Dairi has given us the Donn of Cooley

when it would take the whole strength of the four provinces to get it away by force?"

"The whole strength of the four provinces, did you say?" and the second messenger spat on the floor. "I would not mind if a stream of blood came out of your mouth for saying the like of that. Let me tell you if the Donn of Cooley were not given us freely we'd take it by force and Dairi be hanged." But they thought they were entirely alone.

Alas for them! Dairi's chief-steward who was waiting on them overheard every word they said and went forthwith to tell Dairi.

"By the gods of my tribes!" swore Dairi savagely. "I swear they will not get the Donn of Cooley at all now. Let them try to take him by force. Just let them try that's all."

But he did not say anything to them that night. In the morning, however, when macRoth asked for the bull, he turned on him, saying, "If I were in the habit of treating messengers or traveling folk foully not one of you would go out the door alive."

MacRoth could not understand the change that had come over him overnight. "Wh—what's the matter? Wh—what's happened?" he stammered. "Did not the messengers say last night that unless I gave up the Donn of Cooley freely he would be taken by force?"

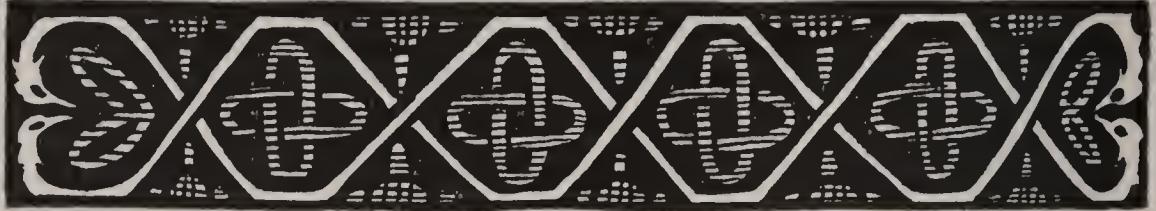
"Och, they were drunk, man. 'Tis not for you to mind what they said and they in their cups," said macRoth.

“Even so,” said Dairi, “I will not give up the bull unless I can help it.”

When the messengers arrived back at Cruachan, Maeve asked how they had fared and macRoth told her what had happened.

“Oh!” exclaimed Maeve, “I can see the wretch never intended giving the bull at all. But no matter. We will take him by force.”

And with those words was the Cattle Raid of Cooley declared.



## CHAPTER TWENTY-FOUR

### *The Fight with Ferdiad*

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AND Scatach told Cuchulain at the Cattle Raid of Cooley the warriors of Maeve would come against him and single-handed he would repulse them.

Ordinarily Maeve would have hesitated to try to take the Donn of Cooley by force. It meant invading Ulster. It meant war; war with the strongest province in Erin. But Fedlem of the Fairy People assured her the warriors of Ulster were lying weak and helpless under an enchantment; the victims of a curse.

And the curse on the warriors of Ulster was laid on them by Macha of the Golden Hair many years before. She had been shamed by the King of Ulster at the time of the birth of her twin sons. It was then that she cursed the warriors of Ulster.

“From this day forth the shame you have put upon me will be a shame unto yourselves. When you are endangered you will be overcome with the weakness of a woman in her pain and five days and four nights will it debilitate you; unto the ninth generation so shall it be.”

And it was even so.

But Cuchulain was not descended from Ulster. The Sun-god was his father and for that reason the curse did not fall on him. Nevertheless a great and terrible responsibility was his. While the warriors of Ulster were in their weakness it behooved him to guard the province against the armies of Maeve.

Now, when Maeve marched out of Cruachan her warriors were divided into three troops each of thirty hundred men, and the first troop had heads of black hair and wore gold shirts and green cloaks fastened with brooches of white bronze, and their swords had white sheaths and hilts of white bronze; and the second troop wore their hair cut short and their cloaks were grey and they had on white shirts and their swords were sheathed in white bronze and hilted with gold; and the third troop had blond hair and their cloaks were crimson and they wore gold brooches and bejewelled breast plates and marched in step to a stirring battle chant.

It was not long before they came to the Ulster border and they encamped for the night at a place called Ardcullin. That night there was a great snow-fall and for once all the provinces of Erin were united under a common blanket; a soft, white blanket that rendered impossible lighting a fire and consequently the preparation of any food. It was a dispirited army therefore that plunged next morning into Ulster. To make matters worse they had not gone very far when they stumbled across

the headless bodies of two of their look-outs, the sons of Nera. Who had killed them? Maeve could but guess—Cuchulain!

Cautiously they proceeded and on the morning of the morrow, came to a narrow mountain pass blocked by a freshly hewn oak. Written on the tree was a warning not to venture any further. Who had written it? Maeve could but guess—Cuchulain!

After some deliberation she decided to send Fraech, son of Idath, on ahead to spy out the lay of the land. When he did not return she cast caution to the wind and at the head of her army crossed the oak and marched eastward. On a river bank they found Fraech beheaded, dead. Shortly thereafter Baiscne, Maeve's dog, was killed by a sling-shot. Then Orlam, her son, was slain in a wood where he had gone to cut holly poles to mend his chariot and it was while looking for him that the three sons of Garach met their death. Who was it that harassed them so? Maeve could but guess—Cuchulain!

Still she urged her troops forward and presently they came to the Plain of Muirthemne, Cuchulain's inheritance, where they carried off or destroyed all before them. Even so their triumph was short-lived. A river thereabouts in a state of flood carried off three tens of their chariots and Maeve, upon sending Ulla, one of her favorite warriors, to test the depth of the river, unwittingly caused another calamity, for he was swept away in the churning,

madly swirling, muddy waters. A little while later Raen and Rae, two warriors of the third troop, were struck down by twin javelins hurled by a powerful arm.

Maeve was convinced then it was Cuchulain that harassed her. Hurriedly she dispatched messengers to seek him out and offer him favorable terms to espouse her cause. When the messengers returned it was with these tidings: the only terms Cuchulain would accept were that one of her army fight alone with him every day and while the fight was going on the rest of the army could advance unmolested where it liked, but so soon as he killed the warrior sent against him the army must halt nor move again till the next day.

What else could Maeve do but accept? Better the devil you see than the devil you don't see, as the saying goes. Cuchulain would now be out in the open and she need not fear that Death lurked behind every bush stirred by the breeze. Besides she felt confident the first man-sized warrior she sent against him would make an end of him and she would then be free to continue her campaign and seize the Donn of Cooley.

Ah, Maeve of Cruachan, it does not pay to be too sure ever. You found that out, didn't you? And 'twas the costly experience. Etarcomal was killed on you and Natchrantal and Buac son of Bainblai, not to mention Rae the Satirist that Cuchulain's spear pierced to the marrow.

Desperate then, she called on Ferdiad son of Daman son of Dairi, the terrible warrior of the Fir Domnann, the horn-skin from Irrus Domnann, the fierce, the unbeatable, the all-conquering. If he could not overcome Cuchulain then who could? He too had been schooled by Scatach and knew as many feats as Cuchulain and he had strong armor to protect himself against any man that fought with him.

But let us go over now to Cuchulain who with O'Loeg, his charioteer, awaits the arrival of Ferdiad at a nearby ford. Oh horrors! Can this really be he? What a frightening sight he is in the heat of his battle-fury, with the witches of the valley and the fairy people screaming 'round him the way he will look doubly fierce to Ferdiad.

Ah, there came Ferdiad now, boastful words bubbling on his lips like soap in a washtub of a Monday.

"O Cuchulain, why do you fight such a strong champion as me? Your flesh will be red with wounds over the steam of your horses and should you come through alive it is a firebrand in sore need of healing you will be."

"I have come in anger to test you in battle till on you comes havoc," Cuchulain answered. "Defend your head."

Whereupon they clashed.

And they defended themselves with two equally matched shields. And the weapons they used were their eight small darts and their eight straight

swords with ornaments of walrus-tooth and their eight lesser ivoried spears that flew to and fro between them like bees on a day in June. And they fought from early morning till the mid-day sun flamed like a ruby overhead. And albeit excellent was their throwing, excellent also was their defence, so that during all that time neither drew any blood.

“Let us put aside these weapons now, O Cuchulain,” Ferdiad suggested. “For it is not using the like of them the fight will be settled.”

“What then shall we use?” Cuchulain asked.

“Our throwing spears with the cords of hard flax on them.”

And again they came together and from mid-day till sun-down they cast at one another with the spears. And albeit excellent was their defence, excellent also was their throwing, so that both bled profusely from the wounds they inflicted on one another during that time.

“Let us leave off now,” said Ferdiad. “The end of the day is on us. We shall fight again tomorrow.”

“Aye, let us have done,” sighed Cuchulain.

In truth he was weary. To be fighting the livelong day is not the work of a suckling child.

They slept by the ford that night and herbwomen came to dress their wounds and put a curing charm on them. In the morning they rose up.

“What weapons today?” asked Cuchulain.

“I chose them yesterday; ‘tis your turn today,” said Ferdiad.

"That is so," Cuchulain agreed. "Therefore let us use our lances, for by thrusting we may come nearer a decision than we did by casting. And let us fight from our chariots on this day."

Their chariots were yoked and they armed themselves with broad shields and their well-tempered lances. And they began to thrust and to hack and to cut and to wound from daybreak to the close of evening. At twilight their horses were all in and their drivers prostrate and they themselves well nigh exhausted.

"Let us leave off now," said Cuchulain. "Our horses are done for, our drivers tired and when they are, it is no shame for us too to be spent."

"Let us leave off indeed," Ferdiad assented.

And they threw their arms down and that night they slept by the same fire with the healing and curing folk tending their wounds; nursing them the night long.

Early next day they arose and Cuchulain noticed a dark look on Ferdiad's face.

"It is bad you look this day, Ferdiad," he said. "There is darkness on your face this day and your hair has become dark and your eye drowsy and your upright form has gone from you."

"It is not from fear nor dread of you that has happened to me," Ferdiad replied. "There is not this day in Ireland a champion I could not conquer."

"You have the choice of weapons," Cuchulain reminded him.

"Aye, so I have. It is our swords we will use this day, for by casting and by thrusting we have not reached a decision."

And they armed themselves with great long shields and their heavy, hard-smiting swords, and they began to strike and to hew and to gash and to pierce and to slit, till as big as the head of a month old babe was each bruise and each wound they inflicted one on the other. And they fought from sun-up to sun-down but were no nearer reaching a decision than on the previous day.

That night they did not sleep by the same fire. They drew apart sorrowful and sad and sore and full of suffering.

Ferdiad was early up on the morrow and he went alone to the ford of combat. Something told him that day would decide the issue. Either one or both would fall. And he donned his battle suit.

Presently Cuchulain arrived.

"The choice of weapons is yours today," Ferdiad said to him.

"Spears," said Cuchulain.

"Spears it is," agreed Ferdiad although it pained him to say the words. So far Cuchulain had destroyed every hero that came against him with a spear.

Wisha, you never saw such a fight as the fight was fought that day. 'Twas a terrifying spectacle; at the same time a thrilling one, you understand. From dawn to mid-day they hurled their spears at one another and at mid-day they became filled with

the rage of wild men and drew close to one another. Cuchulain leaped up then and landed on the boss of Ferdiad's shield and strove to strike off his head. But Ferdiad hit the shield a blow with his left elbow and sent him flying. He tried again but Ferdiad smote the shield with his knee this time and like an infant falling out of bed Cuchulain tumbled into the ford.

O'Loeg saw that happen. "Woe is Cuchulain!" cried he. "Ferdiad has shaken you as an angry woman shakes her child. He has rinsed you as a cup is rinsed in a tub. He has ground you as the mills grind corn. He has pierced you as an awl bores through a plank. He has bound you as ivy binds a tree. He has pounced on you even as the hawk pounces on little birds, so that no more have you any right nor claim to courage nor valor nor a brave name, you little bit of an elf-man!"

Fast as the wind, swifter than a swallow over water, with the dash of a dragon and the strength of a lion, Cuchulain rose up and hurled himself at Ferdiad for the third time.

So close, so fierce a fight did they make, their heads met above, their feet below and their hands in the middle, over the rims and bosses of their shields.

So close, so fierce a fight did they make, their shields split from rim to center.

So close, so fierce a fight did they make, their spears bent and quivered from tip to hilt.

So close, so fierce a fight did they make, the fairy people, the witches and the spirits of the glens and dells, screamed from the rims of their shields and the tips of their spears.

So close, so fierce a fight did they make, that the horses of Maeve and her army ran amuck, bursting their chains, and their harness and the women and the children, the undersized and the weak and the mad folk that were with them, ran racing madly out of camp southwestward.

Of a sudden Ferdiad caught Cuchulain off guard and wounded him so that the ford ran red with his blood. Gasping with pain Cuchulain called on O'Loeg for a fresh spear. The one he had was bent beyond all recognition. O'Loeg tossed him one and he caught it skillfully between his toes.

"Defend yourself, O Ferdiad!" he called in a voice terrible to hear.

Ferdiad tried to cover up behind his battered shield, but too late. Cuchulain made a straight cast at him and the spear pierced his armor and buried itself in his body.

Keeling, expiring, "I am smitten. I die. The crows and the rooks have a feast this night; they will pick my bones white. A triumph for you, O Cuchulain. A triumph for you," Ferdiad sighed.

Weakly Cuchulain smiled then swooned with pain of his wounds.



## CHAPTER TWENTY-FIVE

### *The End of the Raid*

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MEANWHILE the warriors of Ulster had recovered from their weakness and were marching against Maeve.

During the greater part of the battle which followed, Cuchulain lay ill of his wounds on a leaf strewn litter; O'Loeg by his side, tending his wants. Several times he tried to rise up but O'Loeg forced him back and bound him with ropes lest his wounds open and he bleed to death.

"O'Loeg," he called out then in his misery, "O'Loeg go, let you and bring me word of the battle."

When O'Loeg came back, "I have seen a herd

of cattle breaking out of Maeve's camp," he told him. "Soldiers ran after it and the warriors of Ulster bore down on them."

"Woe is me and I on my back," Cuchulain moaned. "That herd is the start of a great battle. 'Tis the Donn of Cooley and his heifers that are in it. Go O'Loeg! Hurry O'Loeg! Stir up the warriors of Ulster into their battle-fury. Tell them it was I sent you. Tell them I will turn my face away from Ulster and this night perish if they suffer defeat."

So soon as the warriors of Ulster received his message those of them that were not already on the field of battle rose up and without waiting to put on a stitch of clothes, grabbed their weapons and rushed out.

Here we must pause to correct an omission made purposely in order to avoid confusion. It has to do with the identity of the leader of Maeve's army. Doubtless it will come as a surprise. Fergus macRogh is who it was. Yes, Fergus had quarreled with King Conchubar. What about? To tell that would be to enter on another story. Suffice it to say as a result of the quarrel Fergus pledged allegiance to Maeve.

Now when Maeve saw the warriors of Ulster coming against her she ordered Fergus to stop them, to drive them back.

Right well did Fergus do her bidding. Once, twice, three times the warriors of Ulster re-

treated before him pell mell and in wild confusion.

"Do not attack again, men!" cried King Conchubar. "I will go alone and see who it is that drives us back."

Fergus! So it was Fergus! His rage knew no bounds. He poised his spear. But Fergus was too fast for him. Three murderous blows he rained on his shield and the shield screamed shrilly as if in pain and the warriors of Ulster screamed with it and the three waves of Erin answered it.

"So it is you, Conchubar, that comes against me," Fergus muttered then.

"Aye, 'tis I!" King Conchubar cried. "The man that is more powerful and greater than you, more comely and younger than you; the man that exiled you from Ulster; the man that made your house a warren for the rat, a web for the spider, a dark place for the bat; the man that will overcome you this day and drive you back traitor that you are."

Fergus saw red. Lifting up his sword, he swung it over his head to make an end of King Conchubar and cut a swathe in the warriors of Ulster at one fell blow.

But it was then Cormac Conloingeas, Conchubar's son, rushed at him and threw his arms about his legs.

"O Fergus," he begged, "let you not in your might and great anger wipe out the whole army of Ulster."

Fergus tried to push him away. "Leave go!

Leave go of me! I must, I will strike my three blows on the warriors of Ulster."

Cormac continued to cling to him, pleading . . . pleading.

At last Fergus forebore. "Tell Conchubar to go back to the head of his army and I will stay my hand," he said.

King Conchubar retired.

Then Fergus took his sword and struck his three blows at the three mountains on his right, cutting off their tops so that to this day they are called, "the three bare hills of Meath."

In the meantime Cuchulain having heard the screaming of Conchubar's shield the time Fergus struck it, asked O'Loeg who had dared strike those blows and he still living.

"'Twas Fergus son of Rogh that did it," said O'Loeg.

"And where are the armies now?" Cuchulain asked.

"At Gairech."

"By my oath they will not reach Ilgairech before I will be with them!"

And despite the protests of O'Loeg, Cuchulain exerted himself and broke the ropes that bound him and threw off the herbs from his wounds and, rising up, began searching for his weapons. They were not there. Some one must have hidden them. Undaunted, he tore a shaft loose from his chariot and dashed off to the battlefield.

His coming put heart into the warriors of Ulster. With renewed vigor and vitality they entered the fray.

Wielding the shaft, Cuchulain beat his way to Fergus.

"Go back, Fergus!" he cried. "Go back else I will tear you to pieces as a hawk would a linnet."

"Save your threats," blustered Fergus. "It is well able for you we are this day."

Cuchulain lashed out with the shaft.

Fergus retreated three paces.

Again Cuchulain swung the shaft and again Fergus gave way.

When Maeve's army saw that they lost heart and with the warriors of Ulster bearing down on them they broke ground and fled in disordered retreat.

Oh, what slaughter! What slaughter!

Finally Cuchulain caught up with Maeve herself.

"A favor to me, O Cuchulain, a favor to me," she wailed.

"What would it be?"

"Let the rest of my army pass under the great ford westward under your protection."

"I'll grant you that," agreed Cuchulain.

And so what was left of Maeve's army crossed the great ford of the Sionnan at Athluain and from thence wended its *via dolor*, its sorrowful way, back to Cruachan.

Then did Cuchulain take his sword that O'Loeg

brought to him and cut off the tops of the three rocks of Athluain so that if any one ever mentioned "the three bare hills of Meath," the three bare rocks of Athluain would be there to give him his answer.

And that was the end of the famous Cattle Raid of Cooley.



## CHAPTER TWENTY-SIX

### *The Beginning of the End*

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BUT you must not imagine for a moment that Maeve forgave Cuchulain for overcoming her, defeating her. On the contrary she determined by fair means or foul to bring about his downfall, his death even, and to that end she sent for Erc son of Cairbre Niafer, Lugaid son of Cu Roi macDairi and the three, one-eyed daughters of Calatin. These five hated even the ground trod by Cuchulain. At one time or another he had slain some one dear to them. Revenge was all they lived for; it was their one ambition. The one-eyed daughters of Calatin had devoted themselves to the study of witchcraft and enchantment. All over the world they wandered, gleaning secret lore, hoping one day to use it against Cuchulain. According to Maeve that day was now near at hand.

“Do you remember all you have learned?” she asked them.

“Remember! We can work a multitude of dark and horrible spells and by mystic words create terrible battles.”

"You have done well, O daughters of Calatin. Hold yourselves in readiness till I give the word and then . . ." The grim smile that compressed her lips at this point was more expressive than any further word Maeve might have spoken.

Later she unburdened herself to Lugaid and Erc.

"My plans are laid. We must gather together a great army. When it is known we march against Cuchulain his enemies will flock to our banner. There is not in the four provinces a king nor chieftain nor warrior no matter how humble, that did not lose a relative or friend by him at the Cattle Raid of Cooley."

"I will go south to the king of Munster for aid," Lugaid volunteered.

"And I, I will call upon the king of Leinster," Erc promised.

Both were successful. Within a week the king of Munster and his army, and the king of Leinster and his army arrived at Cruachan. For three days and three nights Maeve feasted them. Then they began their march on Ulster, on Cuchulain.

It was not long before King Conchubar learned they were plundering the border.

"Leborcam! Where is Leborcam?" he cried.

Leborcam, it will be remembered, was his conversation woman.

"I am here, O King."

"You are, are you?" King Conchubar looked deep into her eyes, impressing her with the serious-

ness of the situation. "Go, let you," he ordered her, "go to Muirthemne and get Cuchulain. Tell him it is urgent; to come at once; not to tarry; not to linger."

It was on Baile's Strand, Leborcam found him and he shooting at sea gulls and cormorants with his sling. At that he was missing them; a bad omen thought he; a very bad omen. When had he ever missed before? Never. But never!

"I bring tidings from Conchubar," Leborcam began and she told him in as few words as possible about Maeve and all that was taking place. "And," she added, "even though the warriors of Ulster be in their weakness it is not for you to go out alone. 'Tis not a bull this is at stake this time. 'Tis you, Cuchulain. 'Tis here to Muirthemne Maeve will come."

"To Muirthemne!" Cuchulain's eyes flashed fire. "If that is the case I must stay and defend the place."

"'Tis best that you come to Emain Macha," Leborcam reasoned. "You have friends there. Not a man, woman nor child in the place but what would cheerfully give his right arm for you."

Her words would have been as chaff before the wind had not Emer come in just then and given him the same advice, to proceed to Emain Macha.

So he went and upon his arrival was shown into the Royal House where the women, the bards and the poets came and spoke sweet words to him. They

were so solicitous of his well-being he began to suspect they were hiding something from him. They were. King Conchubar had gone off to Cooley to a feast at the house of Connal son of Gleo Glas without leaving word for him to follow after him, and nobody knew where to reach him.

But before he went King Conchubar had instructed Cathbad the Druid and the learned men regarding him. "I leave him in your keeping," he said. "It is up to you to save him from Maeve and Erc and Lugaid and the one-eyed daughters of Calatin. Should he be killed Ulster will be no more. Ulster is Cuchulain. Cuchulain is Ulster."

Meanwhile Maeve had arrived at Muirthemne. Finding no trace of Cuchulain she ordered everything burnt or destroyed for miles around. Guessing that he had gone to Emain Macha, the one-eyed daughters of Calatin took matters into their own hands. Throwing a bridle on the wind they rode it thither.

On the lawn before the Royal House they dismounted and at once began to claw the earth and tear the grass and by their mystic words make it seem as if an army was in it.

Looking out, Cuchulain blushed for shame. An army so near and he in his sitting idle! Tumbling the couch from under him with a kick he reached for his sword.

If he did Cathbad's son, Geannan, laid hold of him. "Let you not be making an amadan of your-

self," he warned him. "What you see is nought but the witchcraft of the one-eyed daughters of Calatin."

Still and all he had a hard time of it, calming him; indeed if Cathbad himself had not come to the rescue Cuchulain would have rushed out in spite of all.

Next day the one-eyed daughters of Calatin repeated their weird rites and, looking out, Cuchulain imagined he saw Maeve's army in all its terrible strength and on his startled, bewildered ear fell the magic strains of the harp of the son of Mangur, he that was chief musician to the Fairy People. He knew then that his time was come, that he had not much longer to live. He did not need to be told that Mangur's music was the precursor of Death any more than those of us who hear the bean-sidhe today. And he sighed, thinking of his strength that would soon be gone from him, leaving him weak and useless. Then one of the daughters of Calatin changed herself into a crow and flew over his head, mocking him. "Go out," she screamed, "and save Muirthemne. Maeve is destroying it. Maeve is burning it. Not a stick nor a stone is she leaving untouched. Go out, coward! Go out!"

Knowing full well that he was a target of witchcraft, nevertheless, Cuchulain was unable to contain himself and he would have gone out and fought till he dropped in his tracks had not the noise of

the battle and the music of the harp confused him so that he knew not which way to turn. Then Cathbad came and laid a fatherly arm about his shoulders.

"Raise not your hand against them," he counselled him. "In another three days the power of their spells will be broken. Then you can go out if you like and the whole world will ring with your fame and lasting victories."

Another three days! Cuchulain bit his lip. He doubted that he could contain himself that long.

Cathbad must have noticed his indecision, for he went on, "Tomorrow we will go away to the Deaf Valley where you will not be able to hear the daughters of Calatin nor the music of the Fairy People."

To this Cuchulain raised no objection. For once he was willing to let somebody else do his thinking for him.

Into the Deaf Valley they went next day; Cuchulain and Cathbad and Emer and Niamh of the women of Ulster and many another whose name escapes us.

"*Ochone, ochone,*" mourned Cuchulain, "why did I ever come here? I will be branded a coward. Maeve will say it was to escape her I came."

"Whisth, have done, let you," said Niamh. "You gave me your word you would not go against Maeve without leave from me."

"You do well to remind me. Have no fear; I will not break my promise," said Cuchulain.

He unyoked his chariot then and turned the Grey of Macha and the Black of Sainglenn loose to graze.

In the meantime the one-eyed daughters of Calatin had arrived at Emain Macha. Great was their fury when they found Cuchulain gone.

"Cathbad has hidden him away from us, but we will find him," they shrieked, and, seizing a gust of wind by the mane, they fastly rode over all the province looking for him.

It was the Grey of Macha and the Black of Sainglenn that they saw first and they knew then that Cuchulain was in the Deaf Valley. Shortly they heard the strains of sweet music and laughter and women's voices raised in song. It was clear that Cuchulain's companions were doing their level best to cheer him up.

Faces purple of rage, the one-eyed daughters of Calatin entered the valley, taking with them as they went dead leaves from the trees, burrs and thistle stalks that they turned into warriors so that when they came nigh the place where Cuchulain was a great army, 'twould seem, marched before them.

Emer and Niamh heard them coming and raised their voices to drown them out the way Cuchulain might not hear them. But Cuchulain heard and hearing cried, "Weirasthru, I hear warriors shouting at the top of their voices. They are laying

waste the province. I am ruined. My fame is no more. My name is in the mud."

"Take it easy; take it easy now," comforted Cathbad. "'Tis only the one-eyed daughters of Calatin weaving their enchantments to lure you forth."

Cuchulain clenched his fists. His battle-fury was beginning to stir in him. But knowing Cathbad spoke the truth he refrained from action.

It was then that Badb, the eldest of the one-eyed daughters of Calatin, lost her temper. "Keep on making the sounds of fighting," she bade her sisters. "I am going to speak to Cuchulain even though he kill me."

Putting on herself the appearance of one of Niamh's handmaidens, she called to Niamh, pretending she wished to speak to her.

Alas for Niamh! Before she realized what was happening Badb had led her down the valley and shrouded her in a heavy mist the way she could not find her way back to Cuchulain.

Then Badb went back, taking upon herself the fair form of Niamh.

"Cuchulain!" she cried, feigning alarm. "Ulster is being destroyed. If it is to be saved at all you must rise up and go out and give battle to Maeve." But Cuchulain was depressed at the thought.

"Woe is me," sighed Cuchulain. "You made me promise not to go and now you would have me go; now when 'tis too late maybe." Rising up he threw

his cloak about him but as he was fastening it with a brooch, the brooch fell and pierced his foot.

"A bad omen! A bad omen!" everybody wailed.

"True." Cuchulain accepted it philosophically. "The brooch is my friend. It gives me warning."

With that he went out and bade O'Loeg yoke up. But the Grey of Macha would not let O'Loeg come near him.

"This," muttered O'Loeg, "is a bad sign, an evil sign," and he went and told Cuchulain.

Cuchulain's eyes clouded over. The net was drawing tighter and tighter around him. There was no escape. Yet he went out himself to catch the Grey. And he spoke to him coaxingly, "For why do you do this to me? 'Tis not your habit to fail me and I in sore need of your aid."

The Grey came up close to him and Cuchulain saw that his eyes were filled with tears, tears of blood that fell at his feet. He could not trust himself to say another word. Silently, with a lump burning in his throat, he yoked the Grey and the Black of Sainglenn and away with him.

Southward he went along the Meadhon Luachair road, leaving Emer broken-hearted, for she knew he would never come back.



## CHAPTER TWENTY-SEVEN

### *The Passing of Cuchulain*

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AND Scatach the woman-warrior told Cuchulain one other thing the time she foretold his future. He would die a noble death, she said. Did he? Read. Read, let you.

On his way southward he met up with three old hags. He did not know that human beings—if such indeed they were—could be so ugly. And the sight was gone from the left eye of each of them. They had built a fire by the roadside and were roasting a dog on rowantree spits the while they muttered curses and evil spells. Cuchulain would fain have passed them by. But they called out to him.

“Visit a while with us, O mighty Cuchulain!”

"I have no time for visiting today."

"If it were roast ox you would find time. Just because we are poor and needs must eat dog there is the great hurry entirely on you."

Ever democratic, Cuchulain resented this remark and to prove it was not so he had O'Loeg pull up. One of the hags then gave him a shoulder bone of the dog out of her left hand. He ate it out of his left hand and afterwards held the bone down by his left side. He had but done so when his left arm and side were paralyzed; withered and paralyzed. Furiously, he turned on the hags. They were gone, they'd vanished. It is hard to say for sure, but we suspect they were the one-eyed daughters of Calatin.

Onward Cuchulain drove along the Slieve Midluachra and 'round Slieve Fuad. There it was that Erc, son of Cairbre Niafer, caught sight of him.

"Cuchulain is coming!" he cried at the top of his voice. "Get ready to meet him."

Cuchulain is coming! Once that cry would have instilled terror into the hearts of Maeve's army, but now they quickly made a fence of their shields under Erc's direction. At each corner of the fence Erc placed two warriors and a druid. The warriors were to pretend to be fighting, the druids intervening. Moreover, if he came up to them the druids were to ask Cuchulain for his spear, for it had been prophesied that a king would be slain by it unless it were given when asked for. Then Erc made the

whole army utter a terrifying cry to frighten Cuchulain.

But paralyzed and beset by evil omens as he was Cuchulain charged, wielding his sword and spear to such good advantage that heads and arms and hands and legs and feet went flying in all directions to the four corners of the plain of Muirthemne and grey was the field with brains.

Suddenly he saw two of the warriors Erc had told to feign fighting. The druid asked him to intervene, to stop them. With a wild cry he leaped on them and with two blows of his fist laid them low.

"Now, give me your spear," said the druid.

"Maeve's men are upon me. I am attacking them and will not give it up," Cuchulain replied.

"I will put a curse on you," threatened the druid.

Whereupon Cuchulain hurled the spear at him, handle foremost, and it pierced the druid's head and nine others in line behind him.

After that Cuchulain charged the army again. But Lugaid picked up his spear.

"Who will fall by this spear?" he asked the one-eyed daughters of Calatin.

"A king will fall by it."

Lugaid grinned evilly and hurled it at Cuchulain's chariot. It missed. It missed Cuchulain. But it found O'Loeg. Poor O'Loeg. Poor faithful O'Loeg.

"Ochone," he whispered in his pain, "'tis a mortal wound."

Cuchulain bent down and kissed him. O'Loeg sank back. Then Cuchulain drew the spear out of him.

"Today I must be a charioteer as well as a warrior," he muttered forlornly.

A little while later he saw another pair of Erc's warriors fighting. He did not wait for the druid to ask him to intervene this time. Rushing at them he dashed them to pieces against a rock.

"Give me your spear," demanded the druid.

"I gave it once to my sorrow; I'll not do so again," refused Cuchulain.

"I will revile Ulster for your refusal," said the druid.

"Ulster will never be reviled on my account." So saying Cuchulain hurled the spear at him and it went through his head and nine others behind him.

It was Erc that retrieved it.

"Who will fall by this spear?" he asked the one-eyed daughters of Calatin.

"A king will fall by it."

"You told that to Lugaid."

"We told no lie. A king fell; a king of charioteers."

Then Erc made his cast. It missed. It missed Cuchulain. But it found the Grey of Macha. Cuchulain's heart almost broke. But he bade the Grey farewell and drew the spear out of him. With stumbling steps the Grey plodded off across the

plain towards Glas-linn, the grey pool in Slieve Fuad.

Cuchulain watched him out of sight before attacking another pair of fighting warriors. Like the others he killed them and the druid then demanded his spear.

"I will not give it up," said Cuchulain.

"I will put a bad name on your kindred," shouted the druid.

"Word that I have been given a bad name will never go back there where I am never going back. There is little life left in me."

And Cuchulain hurled the spear and it went through the druid's head and through three times nine men in back of him.

Lugaid picked up the spear.

"Who will fall by this spear, O daughters of Calatin?"

"A king will fall by it."

"That is what you told Erc a while back."

"We spoke the truth. A king fell; the king of the steeds of Erin, the Grey of Macha."

With all his might Lugaid made his cast. Straight and true was his aim. He did not miss. With a groan Cuchulain sank down on the chariot cushion, desolated by the thought.

Lugaid, Erc and the warriors of Maeve crowded around him. At last the hound of Culain was down!

"I—I would like to go to yon pool for a drink," he gasped.

"You may go if you promise to come back here," they granted him.

"If I cannot come back you must come for me."

Staggering, clutching his gaping wound he went towards the pool.

There he drank his last drink and laved for the last time. Feeling then, that he could no longer stand up, he dragged himself over to a stone pillar by the side of the pool and tied himself to it so that when his foes came they would find him on his feet, facing them.

They came at last.

"Let us cut off his head," Erc said.

Lugaid and the others were about to agree when the sound of hoofbeats rang out over the plain. It was the Grey of Macha come back to defend his master with his last breath. Rearing and plunging and with blood streaming, gushing from him, he attacked them. Fifty fell by his teeth alone; thirty from each hoof. Gallant animal! He could do no more. Still gnashing his teeth, he fell, rolled to one side and lay still.

A moment later, Lugaid approached Cuchulain. Roughly he pushed back his golden hair, baring his neck. There was a gleam of steel, a spurt of blood and the greatest hero that ever lived had gone to that shadowy land beneath the lakes of Killarney that the Irish call Tir-na-n-og.

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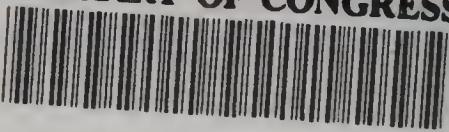








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